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# PEOPLE'S THEOLOGY

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Edited by

J. C. Manalel

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## People's Theology

Edited by

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## Editorial

The term "People's Theology" may sound a little queer to the very people to whom it is attributed, because traditional theology has mostly been unintelligible to them and theologians were looked upon as a lot having their heads in the clouds with their feet off the ground. This is not a misconception of the people. Theology has very often been an intellectual exercise away from the people and above their understanding. 'No one has ever seen God.' Hence such theology has always been 'a futile attempt' by a few intellectuals and a later development too! But it was not so at the beginning. The people that received the gospel of Jesus were mostly the poor – the powerless, oppressed, marginalised and exploited people with whom Jesus identified himself. The written form of the Gospel is the people's experience of the Christ event. It is people's theology.

1990 was the twentieth year of the publication of *Jeevadhara*. A befitting way of celebrating the event was discussed several times by the editorial board and finally it was decided to hold a National Seminar on "People's Theology". The topic is quite in line with the tradition of *Jeevadhara* which has from the very start been doing independent and creative thinking in all the fields of theology so as to make it relevant to the life-situation of the people. It is quite fitting, therefore, that the movement begun with its publication culminates in the articulation of a theology that is capable of recognising, supporting and encouraging the people in their struggle for life, dignity and freedom.

People's Theology sounds a brand-new topic, but it isn't that new. Every liberation theology at heart is people's theology. But every people's theology need not necessarily be liberation theology. The former holds good even when people are liberated

from injustice and oppression, but before such liberation takes place it is all but identical with the latter except that it is wider in perspective. It has to be emphasized that every people should have their own theology, growing out of their context, out of their culture, taking root in their soil and soul. The present situation everywhere is uncondusive to this. The people are ignored by the powers that be. Academicians, intellectuals, political leaders, beaurocracy, government are all planning for the people, but when it comes to the execution of the plans it is very often to their own advantage! In all democracies, including developed nations, the representatives of the people do not represent the people at all. Are religious and Church leaders different? Mostly not. Are theologians any better? Hardly. Most of them want to thrust their stuff down the throats of the people. It is high time that the people themselves started theologizing. Do it they can, perhaps they have to be shown the way to it.

According to the decision of the Editorial Board as stated above, a National Seminar on "People's Theology" was held June 8-11, 1991 at the Jeevadhara Office. Some of our prominent theologians and social activists who have become 'people' with the people from the different parts of India responded to our invitation and a few of them, as assigned earlier, presented papers all of which are incorporated in this issue of *Jeevadhara*.

Dr. Samuel Rayan's Paper is the most important as a general introduction to People's Theology. It is obviously the fruit of deep thinking and wide reading and whole-hearted involvement with the people. He has done a pioneering work to which later theologians may turn for light and lead. The major part of the paper carries stories of several 'responses, struggles and movements' of the people, 'drawing attention to their deeper dimensions where their reality is perhaps indistinguishable from the sound of God's footsteps and the rustle of the Spirit's wings', thus ultimately showing that 'people's theology is found in people's lives rather than in learned treatises or well-argued propositions'. 'Academic traditions have been deriving theology from texts. People's theology, however, recognises its foundations in events of history.' 'It is theology from the people's experience of suffering, from their struggles and hopes, from the perspective of their values. The



masses love life and people, despite the fact that life for them has been full of deprivation and suffering. There is an implicit faith here that our ever-changing and tearful life is horizoned by a Reality that is positive, beautiful and friendly and is at work with us and through us to make the night yield stars, the coal yield diamonds and the muddy pond a lotus flower. . . People's theology comes to birth when people wake up to the truth of their condition, develop a critical consciousness, discern between justice and injustice, between true peace and the apparent calm of structural violence, recognize their own dignity and their vocation to live as God's friends and cooperators in the fashioning of the New Age."

Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer substantiates that Islam's theology is fundamentally a liberation theology. Muhammad opposed every form of exploitation. That is what is implied in the strict prohibition of *riba*. Again *zakah* — the tax for the poor is central to Islam and not merely a question of arm-chair charity. 'The Meccan surahs of the Quran are primarily concerned with the fate of the oppressed — slaves, widows, orphans, the poor and those in debt. The early Quranic verses, representing the primordial experience of the Prophet, express deep concern for these sections of the society.' But later this liberative thrust was sidelined by powerful vested interests. In short Quranic theology is deeply concerned with the poor and the needy and wants the ushering in of a just society where there will be no exploitation and suffering. 'It is highly necessary', says Asghar Ali, 'to rediscover this revolutionary spirit to develop a people's theology in our own way'.

Sr. Corona Mary's paper is concerned with Women's theology, vital and relevant to our context and Dr. Gabriele Dietrich's is not a mere response to it, but a solid contribution to people's theology. Corona shows convincingly that equality of man and woman is a clear teaching of the Bible. Later developments in the Church are a convenient walk-away from it. The emphasis, however, of the paper is on the unreasonable and adamant stand of the Church against the priesthood of women. Gabriele is in full sympathy with Corona's position, but she is afraid, those of the women, who strive for equality with men in a feudalistic and male-dominated system would get themselves



more entangled and lose the little freedom they still have. As to people's theology, Gabriele shows how it comes very close to Feminist movement with its motto of 'Life and its beauty'. 'The whole gamut of life with its activities falls within its horizon'. Though traditionally all life-fostering activities devolved on women, the need of the hour is that it should be held aloft as the common responsibility of both man and woman against the life-destroying forces rampant at large today. 'Faith in the preciousness of life is found in the depths of all religious faiths and that is what leads all liberation movements forward.' 'People's theology necessarily has a multi-religious perspective since people belonging to different religions and caste and cultural background live in the same place'. Jeremiah 31:15-22, especially the last verse: "Yahweh is creating something new on earth; woman protects man" provide us with inspiration and hope for the future: 'Woman on her own takes up the responsibility for protecting the life of humankind and nature as a right'.

Of the two responses to Samuel Rayan's paper only one by George Koonthanam could be available. Koonthanam's may appear to be too radical to some at least of our readers. A specialist in the OT, especially, the Prophets, he would not be satisfied with half-measures nor would stop half-way, but would go the whole hog. 'There is no God', he says, 'but that is enfolded in the struggles of the poor – but that is fully and completely for the poor and with the poor. The poor are the people of God and there is none other. All authentic theology is theology of the poor, by the poor, for the poor. Consequently every theology developed outside the struggles of the poor is mere sham. It is theology of the rich, for the rich, by the rich and against the poor. Theology is always a disservice when done outside its only authentic and genuine matrix, viz. the life and struggles of the poor. There is no option for a theologian but to become poor and live and struggle with the poor if he is to be true to his call. Therefore liberation of theology and conversion of theologians are essential pre-requisites for any contribution to people's theology.

Lastly, the national seminar and this issue of *Jeevadhara* as a whole is an introduction and an invitation to a theology

far more vital than the academic exercise that has been to date claiming that name. We do hope for an explosion of people's theology and for resurgence of interest everywhere in search, reflection and articulation by and with the people and for a new great harvest of people's own perceptions and interpretations in faith of their own history.

J. Constantine Manalel

# People's Theology

## 1. People's Theology

People's theology is to be found in people's life. It is there it must be sought rather than in learned treatises or well-argued propositions. People's theology tends, like God, to be shy and hidden. It is rarely aware of itself as theology; rarely aware of itself as having a theological face or a theological lineage. It often lies, veiled from itself, in the womb of people's stories and struggles, and will take the midwifery of a prodding question or of a bit of reflection for it to come to birth. It lies latent in people's yearnings and hopes and endeavours when these sigh after and reach for life, fuller life, enough rice, some dignity, some real freedom to breathe, to move, to speak, to laugh, to dissent. It is implicit in people's responses to situations of hunger and oppression, no matter how big they are or how small. Its matrix is the people's movements, demands and combats. We should not ask at the outset to see it and read it; we should seek rather to sense it with our whole bodily self, feel it with the entire extent of our skin, and listen to it with the ears of our heart.

This paper plans to recall to mind some, a few, too few of the innumerable responses, struggles and movements of the people, drawing attention all the while to their inner, deeper dimensions where their reality is perhaps indistinguishable from the sound of God's footsteps and the rustle of the Spirit's wings.

## 2. Stories

### a) Concern

On April 8 and 9, 1991, a National Convention on the Bhopal Gas Disaster and its Aftermath met in Delhi. It was called by over 40 different organizations and trade unions, including representatives of the gas victims. It was an expression



of deep and wide concern for the neglected victims of that massive disaster. It was a form of indignant protest against the apathetic, snail-slow, cold-blooded, manipulative, corrupt and criminal manner in which the tragedy has been handled these many years by the (un)concerned governments whether local, national or foreign, as well as against the private, shady settlement of the case between the Rajiv government and the perpetrators of the crime. Among the speakers were also some of the gas-affected women from Bhopal. Through the speeches made, the papers read and the resolutions passed the convention

- i) appealed to political parties and trade unions clearly to spell out their firm commitment to fight for justice and fair compensation to the victims of the disaster;
- ii) reiterated opposition to the supreme Court-mediated 470 USD settlement of 1989 between Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) and the Rajiv government;
- iii) called the settlement "the second Bhopal tragedy";
- iv) demanded that the government launch compensation suits and criminal prosecution against the UCC so as to deter future "corporate malfeasance";
- v) called for a National Commission on Bhopal to be statutorily set up under parliament to monitor relief and rehabilitation of the gas victims, to collect and disseminate information regarding all aspects of the disaster from both the pre-and post-leak periods, and to supervise medical documentation and research;
- vi) decided to set up a Watch Dog Committee of trade unions, public interest groups, health and safety activists and victims' representatives in order to intervene in legal reforms for industrial and environmental safety. The inadequacies, toothlessness, ambiguities and flaws of existing laws were pointed out, especially of the Environment Protection Act and of the Public Liability Insurance Bill;
- vii) called for comprehensive legislation to regulate industrial hazards for the protection of workers and the public from excessively toxic substances; and for a code for elimination of hazards;
- viii) urged the government to begin at once the process of scientific evaluation of injuries to those affected by the Bhopal gas and to determine adequate compensation on the basis of mounting evidence of long-term and genetic health damage; and



stressed the necessity of retaining a "reopener clause" in a future settlement to provide for long-term treatment which may carry into the next generation; and, lastly

ix) recommended an Action Programme at the community level to protect people against irrational and undemocratic industrial policies; and called for vigorous national mobilization and co-ordinated action by trade unions and voluntary agencies on specific dates by the end of June this year(1991).

Presiding over the concluding day's meeting, V.R. Krishna Iyer, former Supreme Court Judge, stressed the duty of the judicial system to provide elementary justice to people. "Humanism of the law must follow humanism of life", he said. (*Times of India* and *Indian Express*, April 10, 1991)

That was an act of national solidarity with and concern for the thousands of women and men affected by the gas disaster, 1984. An act of compassion and fellowship. A cry for justice. A stand taken for the life of the poor against high and mighty killers. An act of splendid anger against feet-dragging bureaucrats and systems of death which make money at the cost of thousands of lives of the poor.

Can we sense here the presence of the living God, and the pressure of his life-giving Spirit? Can we hear in this cry the voice of God, and a word from him and a word about him? And discern here part of a struggle for the liberation of the oppressed and the uplifting of the lowly? And see here a concrete way in which Yahweh who does justice is taking the side of the oppressed? (Ps.103.6)

#### **b) Perhaps, that is it**

Jamsauth is a village not far from Patna, Bihar. It is a concentration of a number of deeply oppressed and impoverished Scheduled Castes — Untouchables; Dalits. The lowest and most degraded of these outcastes is the Musahar group. The group name is said to refer to their food: the rats they are constrained to catch and eat for survival. They labour in the rice fields of great landlords, and contrive to exist on the pittance they are given by way of wages. In an attempt to improve their miserable lot they took to illicit brewing and sale of liquor. It is the liquor merchants that benefit by this, while the condition of the Musahars grows worse as the men often get drunk, and the police raid.

the village from time to time, destroying the utensils and causing the whole village to flee and go into hiding to avoid being jailed and beaten up. Their deteriorating situation makes them ever more dependent on their heartless exploiters and the illicit brew business.

In the late 70's a small team of social activists began to visit Jamsauth, to talk to the women and men, and listen to their stories. An attempt to understand the situation with a view eventually to helping them become aware of themselves, of the cause of their poverty, and of possibilities of change and of a more dignified life in a new future. It was a difficult task, but the activists' persistence and respect for the people succeeded finally in getting the Musahars attend the periodic meetings conducted by the team. In these meetings all sat together, women and men, *savarnas* and untouchables, and discussed their problems. It was a long process, creating new awareness, building up new levels of consciousness, waking up to perception of hidden social forces which create and perpetuate poverty for the many while enriching a few.

A point of time came, a level of consciousness was reached, when the Musahars decided to give up brewing liquor. Instead they would buy buffaloes with the loans the government was providing. Once the people were united through meetings and discussions, and the brewing was given up, police raids stopped, and there was peace in the village.

One Sunday evening the usual meeting started with a bhajan, "He Bhagwan, tera Nam....", "Oh God, your name is echoing all over the world". After the Bhajan one of the activists asked the people whether they had ever seen or experienced God. Would they mind sharing the experience?

A long silence. No one spoke for quite some time. Then stood up Sankuri Musomath, an illiterate Musahar widow. She said: "There was chaos in this *to/a*. We used to brew liquor. Outsiders came to drink, and they abused us. Our men also got drunk and quarrelled among themselves. The police used to come and we fled for life. But now after you came, we don't brew liquor, we don't have to fear the police, we don't fight any more. There is peace in the village, and unity".

She paused for a while; and then she added: "perhaps, that is it" (Joy P.).

Perhaps that is it. That is her, their, experience of God. That is how God came to them: as unity and peace and fearlessness. That is how and where they recognized God as life and as giver of life to people.

### c) There is another widow

This is a story Mother Theresa has been telling time and again. She heard one day of a widow with several children in one of Calcutta's slums. The family was destitute and on the verge of starvation. Mother Theresa visited the woman and placed before her the rice she had brought tied up in a piece of cloth, and engaged her in conversation. As they talked the woman quietly untied the bundle, divided the rice, put one half of it into an earthen vessel, called a son of hers, put the vessel of rice in his hands and whispered something in his ears. The boy went out with the vessel of rice. Mother Theresa could not help asking what was being done. The woman answered that there was another widow living nearby who was in a similar situation of dire need.

With a tear glistening in her eyes, Mother Theresa says: I learned so much that evening. We have much to learn from the poor. The poor have so much to give us. They are rich in blessings far more precious than our goods.

The widow's beautiful spirituality is what we need; and the theology shaping up in its womb is what we must listen to. A spirituality-theology of solidarity and sharing, of compassion and concern, and a divine nobility of heart capable of transcending self in magnificent ways and epic dimensions. Is what the woman did a revelation of the Ultimate that gives and nurtures life? A word about God who dares not appear to the hungry man except in the shape of a bowl of rice? (Gandhiji). 'And rice is heaven; and as we cannot privatise the stars but must together see them, so must we share rice. When the mouth tastes rice, the mind savours heaven. Ah, rice is to be shared, rice is heaven.' (Kim Chi-ha) And Asia is religion and rice. A character in one of Kim Chi-ha's novels preaches the unification of earth and heaven, of earthly food and heavenly food. Is not a rich and beautiful theology lived out day by day by millions of widows and workers and mothers the world over? Some day it may find fuller articulation.

## d) SVA

The frenzied days of the Rath Yatra and Ram Janmabhumi Kar Seva saw the emergence in Delhi of a movement arguing and pleading persuasively for pluralism and sanity and mutual acceptance and communal harmony: the Sampradayikta Virodhi Andolan: SVA. It began with a group of concerned intellectuals and students of Delhi's universities. They met on the Firozshah Kotla grounds; some of them were there day and night, conducting study classes, giving brief crisp talks, staging street plays, singing, fasting, painting, making posters, challenging communalist claims, inviting passers by to speak and express themselves, to join in the play, the fast or the song, to commit themselves to mutual respect, secular politics and communal peace. The enthusiasm and directness of the SVA was contagious, and people responded. People stopped to listen, to pose a question, to sit for a while in solidarity with those who were fasting, to help with poster-making; and some, voluntarily and unasked, left a contribution as they resumed their journey. As days passed the SVA group swelled in numbers, and larger crowds gathered to participate in what was going on. The action lasted for days, and seemed to speak to the spirit of the people who gave their support and approval in ever growing measure. There was no political party behind the movement, nor any organised religion. SVA is an open, secular movement, standing for a human cause, appealing to the human, the reasonable and the mystical in every person and in every authentic religio-cultural tradition.

The clarity, the sensitivity, the courage and the manifest sincerity of the group are the secret of the movement's appeal. The action was not without risks. People had their fears. But the decision was to face threats and pay the price, because the cause was clean and great and worthy of our humanity. The action cost time, and organization and patience and money, however small the amount. But the Andolan is not only the few who initiated it and took the risks and met the costs; the Andolan is all the people who stopped to look and listen, all who understood, sympathised and participated.

In this revelation of rich humanness and essential sanity can we discern the Face of God and sense the presence of the Creator Spirit? Is this movement a word of God, a *theo-logos*?



is it a word about God, disclosing what God wants and wishes for the world, revealing therefore something of Who God is, and in what direction our human wholeness lies? Is there not an anthropology here, a view of the human reality as person and community, which implies a latent pneumatology, an experience of and a word about the Spirit who energizes people to work for the transformation of the earth? Is not society and the world a bit better and healthier and more wholesome and humaner and gentler for the emergence and work and sacrifice of the SVA? Is not the movement a way God comes to take charge of our earth and our history in order to heal it, grace it and lead it to completion?

### e) **What will you eat? Where will you sleep?**

The story is told by Sister Agnes P.: It was sometime in May-June 1980 that I went to a village some 55 klm from Raipur, Madhyapradesh. I was at the time a student of Xavier Institute, Ranchi, and I had to write a paper on women's development. I went to this particular village at the suggestion of friends who were working in the area.

A village health-worker met me at the bus stop and took me to her house. In no time news spread that a stranger had come to the village and most of the villagers, women and men, assembled to see the new-comer. They concluded that I must be upperclass upper caste. But who exactly was I? I told them. I showed them the Cross I was wearing. They understood I was a christian. I was thirsty and asked for a drink of water. They stood stunned.

"We are untouchables", they said. "We cannot give you water to drink. You may not take water from us."

I said I was thirsty and hungry. Caste and class did not matter to me. For them, however, such things mattered much; by no means would they cause me pollution. That I had come into their village and into one of their huts was already a problem. There was a long dialogue. But it was useless to argue. I looked around. There was some food in a vessel. I took a bit of it and ate it. That was a break-through. A woman came forward and poured out some water for me to drink. I sat down and they, not without amazement, served me chappati and sabji, vegetables.

As I was eating, the women sat around me. The men stood outside. Where was I going, and what was my plan? They were astonished to learn that I had come to stay in their village for some time, for several weeks in fact.

"Are you single or married?" the women asked. Single. Unmarried. A Catholic nun. The Cross I was wearing served again as a sign.

"But, then, where will you sleep? and how can you stay in the village?" With some concern they gave me to understand that according to their usage the men are free to take any woman who is unmarried. No comforting news. Inside I felt a bit panicky. The women conferred among themselves in whispers, and then gave me the assurance that they would protect me as long as I was among them.

The women dispersed and returned in a short time, some 20 of them, each carrying a *charpoy*, village bed, and a bamboo stick. My bed was placed in the middle and the twenty beds were arranged all around mine. I was shown how no man could now approach me without first touching them; I should feel safe and go to bed in peace. My sleep was intermittent though I felt confident. And every time I woke up my thoughts centred on the wisdom and concern and generosity of these untouchable village women.

I was accepted in the village and from the second day onwards I could freely walk around and do my work. I stayed with them some three months, and when I left many of the villagers walked with me to the bus place and cried as I bade them goodbye. I was sad to leave them too, I can never forget these people.

Through the sister's act of overcoming caste barriers and her affirmation of common humanity with the villagers, did the Reign of God make a fresh breach into our social history? In it did the Good News to the poor find fresh articulation? Did the protection the women gave their guest constitute a concrete saving deed-word originating in the Spirit and operating through Untouchables? Could that evening scene in the village be a source for theology, and the rich humanity of the Untouchables a reality belonging with the divine Incarnation?

### 3. Exodus

a) Exodus is the story of an enslaved people, told by the enslaved people themselves. It contains their reflection on their experience of oppression, on their struggles to be free, and on their victory. It contains an account of their encounter with, and discovery of a God who, unlike the gods of the kings, generals, landlords and the splendid temples of the time, sides with the oppressed, and provokes and supports justice and liberation struggles. In telling us the story of their striving into freedom they also tell us the story of a God of freedom and justice. A word about themselves is also a word about their God and vice versa. Exodus is people's theology.

b) The Pharaoh Ramses II decides to reduce Asian migrant workers and peasant settlers of the Nile delta to the status of slaves. The slaves are then put to forced labour, and humiliated and ill-treated. The monarch's aim is the Asians' racial extinction: once his fortifications are completed, he will have no use of these slaves. He prefers quiet ways of genocide. He gives orders to midwives attending on Hebrew women in labour, to feel, when a baby is born, for the stones, and if it is a male to kill it quietly and quickly, and announce a still birth. The pharaoh's is a policy of death; his taste is for the cruel, the treacherous and the destructive. What we have in this part of the story is a demonology.

The midwives however refuse to kill. They are clear in their spirit that their whole being and profession as women and as midwives is made and oriented for life. They set aside royal orders, at mortal risk to themselves. It is in this courageous pro-life stand of the women that the revolution starts and theology begins. Here for the first time in the story God is mentioned. God takes the side of the women, acknowledges their bold option as his own; and rewards their stand for children/life with the gift of children of their own. In their riskful dissent from the will of throned might, in their affirmation of life, and in the gift of fresh life they themselves received, they and their circle recognized God as the God of life, the living and life-nurturing God. That is the theology of these women of old. Their word about the God of life is at the same time a word from God about life as holy and decisive.

c) Oppression continues and intensifies. Moses, brought up and educated in the palace, goes out to visit his people, strikes down an Egyptian whom he saw beating a Hebrew, flees from the police, and lives with desert tribes. There God meets him, calls to him out of the burning bush and sends him back to Egypt to work with God for the liberation of the people. The mind of the popular story is that God chose Moses because i) he did not settle down in the comfort of the court and its upper class status; ii) he was honest and authentic enough to acknowledge his roots and publicly affirm his belonging with the oppressed slaves; and iii) he was not apathetic but showed himself capable of anger and action against injustice. Was it not, in fact, in the burning situation of his people in Egypt, and in the fire of anger that raged within him, and in the flames of suffering that hurt and unsettled his soul that he encountered the Mystery of Freedom and heard the ineluctable Imperative of Liberation? That is people's theology; quite a hot one. Not one that domesticates, recommending resignation; not one that alienates, demanding erection of a temple on the holy spot. But a theology that summons you to dangerous living, to confrontation with the mighty, to organizing of the people, to sustained struggle for liberation, and to use of the right moment to strike a blow for freedom.

Not that the Mystery of Freedom and of Life, or of Yahweh the Liberator was clearly seen and explicitly experienced from the outset of the struggle. What is explicit at the start is the people's will to freedom, their No to oppression, and their readiness to struggle. The event is secular: political, economic and cultural. But it is an event of freedom, dignity and life; a critical combat against an establishment of slavery, degradation and death. As such it is an event bound up with the Ultimate Mystery of Freedom and Life, which/who is then perceived and experienced gradually as It/He/She unfolds within the unfolding of human history and of critical consciousness.

#### 4. Struggles

Experiences analogous to the Exodus experience may be found in the history of the Īzhavas, the Channars and the Pulayas of Kerala; of Dalits and Tribals and marginalised peasants and women all over India; and of all oppressed and struggling peoples everywhere. In every revolt, agitation and movement that resists



exploitation, degradation and injustice and fights for justice, human dignity and the right to dignified life, there is the involvement of God who is the absolute Imperative of justice and the maker of women and men in his own Image. Many if not most of the oppressed sectors of our land may be pre-Aryan Adi-Dravida Adivasis, of the Continent, made outcastes and untouchables by invaders who dispossessed and enslaved them. The people were deprived of most or all human dignity and rights wherever Aryan-Brahmin domination prevailed.

#### a) Ezhavas

In 1811 Colonel Munro, who was then both the Dewan of Tiruvitāmkūr and British Resident, abolished slave trade in the State, making the trade a criminal offence, and liberating all slaves who were not connected with agriculture (K.K. Kusuman: *Slavery in Travancore*). The result was the liberation of all slaves except the Pulayas who were the cultivators of rice. Ezhava slaves numbering nearly two lakhs were the chief beneficiaries of the Act. Their emancipation did not affect the State's rice cultivation, nor, therefore, touch its economy. Nor did it, on the other hand, remove all the social and economic disabilities which the community suffered. The removal of all discriminations and the attainment of total liberation was the result of a prolonged struggle by the Ezhava community inspired and led by a whole galaxy of charismatic men like Sri Nārāyaṇa Guru (b. 1856), Dr. Palpu (b. 1863), Kumaran Āsān (b. 1873), T.K. Madhavan (b. 1885), P. Kuruppan (b. 1885), and Sahōdaran Ayyappan (b. 1889).

The revolt these men led against long-standing social oppression grew from the Guru's social reforms and spiritual guidance through his adoption of *sanyāsihood* in defiance of rules which forbade it to non-Aryans; through his consecration of the "Ezhava Śiva" image at Aruvippuram, 1888, to the chagrin and anger of *savarnas*, and his repetition of the act in about 60 other places; through the foundation, 1903, of the Sri Narayan Dharma Paripalana Yōgam; through the call of this Yogam to the government in 1920 to throw open all temples to all Hindus; through the *Vaikom Satyagraha*, 1924-25; through Sahodaran Ayyappan's position that to consider Ezhavas Hindus was like counting fetters your own property on the ground that they have held you in

bondage for years; through his practice from 1917 onwards of eating with all outcastes and untouchables especially the pulayas; and through Asan's anti-caste writings; on to the victorious culmination of the struggle in the government's Temple Entry Proclamation, 1936.

The people's relentless striving which developed through a variety of strategies, brought about a profound social revolution in Kerala. The authenticity of all spirituality and faith is tested by their ability to discern the presence of the Liberator God in this great Exodus from slavery to freedom.

#### **b) Candalabhiksuki**

Asan's *Caṇḍālabhikṣukī*, one of his two works subjecting the Aryan caste ideology to a searching, devastating criticism, is the (Ezhava) people's combat theology. Negatively its theme is the baselessness and destructiveness of the caste system; positively it is an affirmation of global human solidarity and fellowship, and of the centrality of love as the all-embracing and beatifying source and meaning of Reality. Integral to the emancipation struggle of the Ezhava community, this poem is a partial articulation of the humanist theology that suffused the entire liberation movement. It links up directly with the faith that those who love have passed from death to life and live in God and God lives in them, for love is born of God and God is Love-Life.

#### **c) Pulayas**

If the Ezhava community was enslaved and oppressed, treated as untouchable and denied elementary amenities of life, the degradation to which Pulayas were subjected is beyond description. Part of the original inhabitants and the basic tribes of the land, owners and cultivators of the soil and experts in rice culture, the Pulayas, along with Parayas, Kuravas and others were probably enslaved in or after the 8th century A.D. with the Brahmin domination of Kerala. They were bought and sold like cattle; or they changed hands as part of dowries and tributes; and in such transactions the slaves' family relationships were savagely disregarded, parents being forcibly torn from children, and husbands from wives. Choice of marriage partners and all conditions of marriage were settled by slave masters as suited their interests. The government's slaves were rented out to landlords for a payment, and the condition of such slaves was usually the most

wretched. Pulayas were mere implements for rice cultivation rather than part of the people of the state. They were made to work long hours all seven days of the week for very low wages or none. And in old age and sickness they were totally neglected and helpless, and left alone to rot and perish. Where the Pulayas were to live, and how; what they were to wear; and what was to become of their children — was all decided by their caste-and-task masters and by the cruel rigidities of a heartless caste culture. Only a strip of loin cloth was allowed them by way of wear; and women were explicitly forbidden to cover their breasts. Schools, literacy and learning were inaccessible to the Pulayas. Restrictions were placed on their movements, and all public roads were forbidden them. As untouchables whose nearness could pollute, Pulayas had to keep certain prescribed distances from the Touchables, and had to keep calling out certain syllables to obviate any dangerous encounter. Any violation of such prescriptions would mean instant punishment, torture or death on the spot at the discretion of the offended Touchable. Colonel Munroe's 1811 emancipation act applied only to slaves unconnected with agriculture; it gave no relief to Pulayas.

In 1847 missionaries in Tiruvitāmkūr submitted to the king a memorandum, pleading for the liberation of "the slave population invaluable for its services in the cultivation of the country and the chief producers of its food", "employed in the most laborious and unhealthy services". The document mentions the pulayas' inadequate sustenance, miserly scanty clothing, dwellings which afford little shelter from the moisture and cold surrounding them, their degradation and extreme misery. It pleads for relief for the oppressed, and points out that an eighth part of the population of Tiruvitāmkūr according to 1836 census consisted of slaves, excluding the hill tribes many of whom too were in a state of vassalage.

In 1853 children of government slaves were declared free, but this made no difference whatever to the actual situation. Government slaves were actually with landlords, and children grew up in slave conditions. Two years later slavery was officially abolished in the State, but this applied only to slaves owned by the government. The cruel treatment and inhuman discrimination meted out to the majority of the enslaved continued. It was to

change this and to claim for themselves the right to decent human life and human equality that the Pulayas among others rose in revolt, inspiration and leadership forthcoming from one of their own, named Ayyankāli 1863-1941).

The people's movement focussed their demands on three freedoms traditionally denied them: the freedom of movement and the right to use all public roads; the freedom to wear what clothes they chose; and the freedom to attend public schools and the right to education. In 1896 a batch of strong Pulaya youth with Ayyankāli leading them dared to walk the public roads till then closed to them. Numerous violent clashes ensued with *savarna* people in numberless places. The struggle continued for full five years before it was recognized that Pulayas could rightfully travel along public roads without the *savarnas* feeling polluted!

The next struggle was for the right of Pulaya children to study in government schools. The action started in 1906. By 1908 the government sanctioned a lower primary school in Vengannur for Pulaya children, and a Nayar youth agreed, against the wishes of his community, to teach there. The Pulayas were not satisfied with separate schools. A government order followed directing that depressed caste students be admitted to public schools. The movement met with strong opposition from *savarnas* while the *dalits* insisted on its implementation. Clashes followed. Pulaya children arriving in school and their guardians were beaten up. The Pulayas hit back. Caste children left the schools that admitted outcastes. Some schools had to close down. Several were set on fire by *savarnas*, as happened in 1914 at Ūruṭṭampalam (Neyyāttinkara), and at Pullāṭṭu (Tiruvalla). The opposition and the threat only added to Pulaya determination to stand for equality of right to attend public institutions. It was a matter of honour; it was a means of breaking down untouchability prejudices and depressed conditions. It was not merely a matter of literacy.

Since the *savarnas* obstructed the implementation of an order which Pulaya agitation had wrung from the government, the Pulaya community decided to strike work. No depressed caste laborer would step into the rice fields for work till their children could attend schools with other children and study in peace. The first organised workers' strike in the history of Kerala. That was in 1915, before Marxian or Gandhian methods of struggle were



known. Ayyankali knew how to meet a challenge thrown to the honour and the future of his downtrodden community. The strikers supported themselves with what fish they could catch and what forest edibles they could collect or hunt. Rice cultivation in most of Nāñcinad was affected. The government mediated and solved the crisis by settling the education question in favour of the Pulayas. A victory which boosted the oppressed community's unity and sense of organised power. The result: while some 2000 Pulaya children were in school in 1913, there were some 10,913 in 1916, and 17,753 in 1917 — an eightfold increase in the span of four years. And they sat with *savarna* children.

The period 1910 to 1921 was the period of unrest among Pulayas and of clashes with *savarnas*. The conflicts of the last years of this period centred around social reform and the freedom for Pulayas to wear what dress or ornaments they chose without let or hindrance. It was the Channars that first struck at *savarna* arrogance of presuming to dictate clothing and impose near-nakedness. The agitation they started in 1822 came to a successful close in 1859. Whatever freedom they and Sudras and Ezhavas had won was still inaccessible to Pulayas. The Pulaya struggle, strong in Neyyattinkara and Kollam, became conflictual. Pulaya youth who discarded prescribed cloth rules were beaten up by *savarnas* who in their turn got it paid back in kind. Particularly severe was the 1915 Pulaya-Nayar clash in Perinad where Nayers not only disturbed Pulaya Meetings, but burnt down more than 300 Pulaya huts, and paid assassins to do away with Pulaya leadership. Ayyankali visited the place, regrouped frustrated Pulaya youth, lodged the homeless in missionary schools and arranged for a public meeting which was attended by over 4000 Pulayas and presided over by a Nayar, Changanacherry Parameswaran Pilla. The speeches made there were conciliatory, but firm on the cardinal point of Pulaya freedom in matters of clothing and ornaments. The Nayers present agreed with the President's support of Pulaya claims (K. K. Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*; T. H. P. Chentharassery, *Ayyankali*; N. K. Jose, *Ayyankali*).

Such were the initial stages of Pulaya exodus from the Egypt of slavery and oppression to a promised land of relatively greater freedom and dignity. Such were their struggles with the pharaohs of the time who would not easily let God's people go.

Was it not the Spirit of God that sustained the people's combats that secured liberation after liberation, however fragmentary, and opened up a path leading in the direction of a new future?

The Pulaya movement was completely secular. Narayana Guru effected social reform through spiritual leadership. He adopted the Sanātani's sanyāsihood, and made Siva *pratiṣṭhas* a constitutive part of his campaign. The Pulaya movement has no hint of such religious symbolism. All the more profound is its theological content and significance. For theirs was a straight combat for one single central value: Humanity; human freedom; dignity of the human person and of the lowliest human community; and, therefore, of the whole Human Race.

#### d) Akṣarakēraḷam

On April 18, 1991, Kerala celebrated its new and proud status of being the first fully literate State of the Indian union. The credit for this goes to Akṣarakēraḷam, a movement spearheaded by the Kēraḷa Sākṣaratā Samiti (KSS), sponsored by the Nayanar Government which diverted 1600 officials to the KSS, supported by all political parties and voluntary agencies (though a Congress leader sent out a circular opposing the movement), and financed by the Central Government (Rs. 4.63 crore), by the UNESCO (Rs. 1.20 crore) and voluntary organisations (Rs. 1.25 crore). The plan was implemented by an army of 2.37 lakh trained instructors who fanned out into Kēraḷam's 13 districts which were divided into 43 literacy projects, each catering to 50 to 60 thousand persons. Its first wave has been brought to a triumphant conclusion, having achieved 93.66 percent literacy in the State which is above the target of 90 percent set by the National Literacy Mission for a state to be declared fully literate. The triumph is the triumph of the people as a whole, of their imagination and dedication, their commitment and determination as well as their leadership qualities and the capacity to plan and to organise with care and devotion, and reverence for the masses.

This is a human achievement rich in promise for the future not only of Kēraḷam but of India as well, and pregnant with possible chain reaction in the direction of equality and freedom, and therefore of more authentic democracy and people-power. The signs of that future are already visible: in neo-literates' new-found sense of power; in the tears of joy with which they speak of the hopes

and aspirations aroused by the new knowledge; in the courage of village women who with the new ability force panchayat leaders and Block Development officers to adopt new styles of functioning, to start work on time, to listen to people, and provide basic amenities like water-supply for their colonies. Signs of the future may be discerned also in the dialogue and social interaction which the literacy process has initiated between people of different religions and castes; and finally in the longing of the neo-literates for more. To meet this last demand plans are afoot to provide a fourth and a fifth primer; to form *akṣara sanghams* for post-literacy lessons; and to produce new reading materials for which the *Kerala Granthaśālā Sangham*, with its network of 5600 libraries, will take responsibility. And 1000 titles have already been commissioned by the National Literacy Mission (*Times of India* and *Indian Express*, April 17 and 18, 1991: article by Usha Rai).

Usha Rai observes that the movement *Akṣarakēralam* has been marked by flashes of fervour comparable to those that marked the independent struggle; "only in this case it is the mind that has been released from the shackles of ignorance". It has been an Exodus. A human liberation. Liberation of the human. And the honouring of a human right of the people. Infrastructure for a many-pronged human advance. A sense of dignity and self-worth. A new feel of space and freedom, and a new fund of courage and self-confidence. All this spells a growth and development that is specifically human. And the whole of it is the fruit of a remarkably beautiful corporate endeavour, of an exercise in profound human solidarity and comradeship. Neighbour helping neighbour and rejoicing in his/her growth and blossoming. The many-sided human richness of this massive endeavour and fine common achievement is an unmistakable pointer to their divine affinities. What is authentically human is truly divine. *Akṣarakēralam* means that the Image of God in every woman and man has been freshly honoured and refurbished. To build up the dignity of people is to give glory to God. For God's glory is man fully alive. What has been attempted and achieved has the features of a festival and the dimensions of a liturgy. Under the same token one might say that the good news of literacy merges with the good news Jesus brought for the poor. We are witnessing an evangelisation of the poor which is fraught with consequences for religion and society. Can we hear Jesus saying: "I was hungry, and you

gave some rice; I was thirsty and you brought me a cup of water. I was illiterate and you spent time teaching me, Come . . . . ."

e) Examples of people's movements, struggles and fragmentary victories could be multiplied. Many stories in fact both old and new should be told and pondered. All efforts of people to win back freedom and defend the human have to be contemplated with reverence and love. If we listen with the heart we shall hear from within them the stirrings and whisperings of the Spirit. All movements of freedom are movements of the Spirit who is Love. We may recall, for instance:

i) the Kerala fisherfolk's struggle, 1978-1984, for transport facilities and reservation of coastal waters for traditional fishing, and against overcatch and destruction of sea ecology by use of methods which look only to immediate profit and by people who have other means of livelihood and gain.

ii) the Kanyākumāri March, April 1989, to "protect water, protect life", which was perfectly organised on both coast lines from start to finish but which the mercenaries of the government of the rich sought to attack and break up at the moment of its final blossoming in a 15000 strong meeting in Kanyakumari.

iii) the Chipko (hug, cling to) movement which seeks to save the forests and end commercial tree felling and, with it, end also floods, erosion and depletion of soil, droughts, failure of fuel, fodder and food. It seeks especially to establish a caring and mutually supportive relation between human beings and nature. The struggle is against forest officials, lumber merchants, contractors, the police and governments which act as tools of transnational corporations. In many places in India women have saved trees by clinging to them to prevent their felling and forcing governments to intervene in favour of ecology and the rights of the people.

iv) There are numerous agrarian movements, peasant rebellions and tribal revolts. There are the workers' struggles, strikes and insurrections. There are the upheavals of the landless, and the liberation movements of Dalits and depressed classes. There are the many women's movements and student uprisings. Whatever humanising dimensions, liberating orientations and hope-engendering power these movements and struggles have deserve to be explored for their affinity to ultimate meanings and their mediation



of the Spirit's transforming action. A. R. Desai has edited a number of studies on the heroic struggles of the exploited rural poor of India in the colonial period. Desai is emphatic that the usual western and academic assumption that "the Indian peasant has been passive, fatalistic, docile, unresisting and bogged down in the quagmire of superstitions and other-worldly fantasies is wrong and stand refuted... The Indian rural scene during the entire British period and thereafter has been bristling with protests, revolts, and even large-scale militant struggles involving hundreds of villages and lasting for years" (A. R. Desai, ed., *Peasant Revolts in India*, 1975, p. xii). When the sources of life are threatened and the foundations of dignity and community are undermined the Indian peasant, with his deep spiritual sensitivity, shakes his mane and stand up for action. It is precisely within the concrete historical sources of life and the factors that sustain human dignity and community that the presence and action of the Ultimate Ground of Being and Life is to be sought.

v) Desai's work covers peasant and tribal struggles of the colonial period of Indian history. Independence has not solved people's problems, and revolts continue. Some of the new resistance movements are presented in *A Space Within the Struggle* edited, 1990, by Ilina Sen. This volume includes studies in peasant and tribal revolts and land struggles of a leftist orientation in Wynad, Keralam; in Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh; in Bodhgaya, Bihar; also Adivasi struggles and farmers' movements in Maharashtra; *bidi* workers' agitation in Nipani on the border of Karnataka and Maharashtra; construction worker's in Tamil Nadu; and the Assam movement against local people's marginalisation and exploitation by outsiders (See also G. A. Oddie, *Social Protest in India*, 1979, and M. S. A. Rao, ed., *Social Movements in India*, 1978, with extensive bibliography pp. 219-246).

vi) People's theology awaits exploration and discovery by the contemplative eye, in the depths of national liberation struggles all over the world; and in the battles people fought in defense of their land and culture against invaders and colonialists of every sort as for instance when the Philippines resisted conquest by Spain and later by the U. S. A.; in the tenacity and determination of tiny Vietnam in resisting gigantic aggression; in people's struggles against dictators and *contras* foisted on them by imperialist might; in the passion of the south African people under the

apartheid regime, and their costly rejection of racist oppression; in the people's rebellion all over Central and South America against domination and exploitation by the USA and its minions; in the struggles of the poor against agribusiness and TNCs that devour their land and means of subsistence, and against capitalist exploitation; in their critical resistance to corruption in high places, and to nuclear and chemical hazards to which the rich and the powerful have little scruple to expose the poor and the Third World; and finally to polluting species of tourism.

### 5. People's Christology

a) Who discovered the Christ of God in Jesus of Nazareth? And who cared so much for a dead friend's or teacher's body as to discover the Resurrection? Who insighted into the profound and universal significance of Jesus' death and life? And who finally, decided that this Jesus the Christ was the only begotten Son of God?

b) Not those who occupied positions of power in the Temple and controlled the Temple's wealth and the people's conscience. Not the dominant class nor the estate owners. Nor the erudite scribes and theologians, nor the pharisaic sect powerful through holiness. These, rather, were the ones that contrived the murder of Jesus. 'Good riddance' was the only meaning in their eyes of Jesus' death. As for his life, it was first a puzzle to the great ones and the powerful of his church and society, then an embarrassment and finally a threat. They put him questions and he answered them with counter questions (Mk 11:27-33; Mt. 15:1-3). They asked for a sign from heaven, and he refused: no sign shall be given on demand, come the demand from whomsoever, from pharisee or priest or Herod or Satan (Mt. 12:38-39; 4:1-11; Lk. 23:6-12). The signs he would freely give are all earthly signs: they are services of life to the needy, the hungry, the sick, the outcast, and not entertainment for the well-to-do (Mt. 11:4-5). Jesus declined to use the sensational in order to net in people and win a following. He refused to turn stones into bread; refused to jump from the temple tower; refused to amass wealth and power (Lk. 4:1-13). The religious leaders try to trap Jesus in words, to criticise his deeds, to initiate a debate and provoke a conflict. That may be the reason why, according to the Synoptics, Jesus addresses no great discourses to the leaders. The leaders'

encounters with Jesus are usually marked by conflicts. The conflicts arise from radically different interpretations of and adherence to the Law of Moses or the traditions of the leaders concerning such things as table fellowship with sinners, fasting, sabbath observance, purifications, divorce, tax to Caesar, the great commandment, the Davidic sonship of the Messiah, the Resurrection. The leaders saw in Jesus' new interpretations and practices a threat to the continued existence of the Jewish socio-religious system. So they attacked him as a law-breaker, a blasphemer, a sinner; they rejected him and plotted his death. Our theology about Jesus, our Christology, is not the gift of the elders, or the leaders, or the rich or the mighty in church or society.

But was not Jesus rejected by all sections of Israel? Did not John the Baptizer himself have questions about the ultimate identity and significance of Jesus? (Mt. 11:2-6) Did not "this generation" see Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard and a friend of sinners? (Mt. 11:19) Will not "this generation" be condemned by the men of Ninveh for its refusal to repent? (Mt. 12:38-42) Have not cities like Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum been harder of heart than Tyre, Sidon and Sodom? (Mt. 11:20-24) Even his family seems to have had difficulties with him (Mt. 12:46-50; Mk. 3:31-35). The disciples alone remained faithful; though not all: after his Capernaum discourse on the Bread of Life many of his disciples left him for good (Jn. 6:59-66). And those that remained were of little faith (Mt. 14:28-33; 16:5-12), and needed explanations (Mt. 15:15-20). But they remained.

c) They were the men (and the women) who had stood by Jesus in his trials (Lk. 22:28): working class men and women; fisherfolk; simple and unlearned. It is in their insights and experiences that christology had its beginnings. It is in the revelation that these received that our faith has its foundations. Jesus used to thank the Father for hiding "these things" from the learned and the clever, and revealing them to mere children (Mt. 11:25-26). That is God's way, and it is of a piece with the entire biblical tradition which accords a privileged place to the weak, the powerless and the victims of oppression and injustice.

There are several scenes in the Gospels (cf Mk. 2:1 to 3:6; Mt. 11:2 to 16:20) where Jesus serves the people in various ways, healing, feeding, defending the poor and the outcast; and he is met with three distinct responses:

i) The leaders, pharisees and priests are hostile and plot to kill Jesus, so that Jesus has to take to evasive tactics for a while (Mt. 14:13,22,34; 15:21; 29:39; 16:4-5,13; cf Mt. 2:12-14; 4:12; 12:14-15; 14:13-16,20).

ii) The crowd is both delighted and perplexed; they stop half way. "This generation" would neither dance to the flute, nor mourn to a dirge; or it would attempt both (Mt. 11:2-3, 16-19; 12:21-23; 13:55; 14:1-2; 16:13-14).

iii) The disciples are with the crowd for a time perplexed and unsure (Mt. 8:27), but finally they come to see Jesus' identity clearly (Mt. 14:29-33; 16:16).

It is the same facts that face all, but differences in openness and commitment land them in very different conclusions. The difference is illustrated with dramatic effect in Jn. 5 and 9 and 11. It is the open, sensitive heart that truly perceives reality. Thus for the disciples the Jesus event proved to be theological while for the crowds it was merely wonderful, and for the leaders it appeared demonic (Mt. 12:22-32; Jn. 7:19-24; 8:48-53).

d) The disciples, then, are the children, the unlearned and the unclever, to whom the Father gives his revelations (Mt. 11:25-26; see 3:17). They represent the poor to whom the good news is preached (Mt. 11:4-5; Lk. 4:18; 6:20-25); They belong to the *sarx*, the flesh, the socially powerless and inconsequent sectors of the population, which the Word of God became (Jn. 1:14; Mt. 2; 2C 8:89; Phil. 2:6-11; and the Passion story). God who does justice sides with the oppressed. Jesus' death is God's way of expressing his solidarity with the victims. The writer of Hebrews evinces a fine sensitivity to the reality of Jesus as *sarx*, flesh, as divine sharing in the powerlessness of the lowly (Hb. 2:14-18; 4:15; Phil. 2:6-8; Mt. 12:12-21). Jesus explicitly identifies himself with the socially marginalised, with the *sarx*, the hungry, the homeless, the jailed and all the victims of an unjust system (Mt. 25:31-46; Ac 9:5). The meaning of it all is that the poor in the present history are a theological, christological, reality: the little ones; the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters; those who do the will of the Father (Mk. 3:35) by hungering and thirsting for justice and mercy on this earth. The oppressed and the poor are the vicar of Jesus on this earth; to serve them is to serve Him, to despise, hurt or ignore them is to do the same to Him. They



are He, and in their person, life and struggles God is present, and a word of God as well as a word about God is implicit.

It is this Jesus-experience and committed participation in Jesus' struggles for justice and freedom that enabled the disciples to understand and articulate Jesus' meaning and significance. Resurrection in particular is the discovery and glad tidings of women. In a tradition in which women had no social, no religious standing or meaning but only some biological import, Jesus called them to be his collaborators, and made them the bearers of the most beautiful and basic Gospel of the Resurrection. As such they became the first fully christian believers who then invited Peter, John and the other men to the resurrection faith and into the church of the Risen Lord. New Testament christology is people's christology. It is a gift to us from poor and oppressed women and men.

## 6. Perspectives

a) Religious truth or spirituality is a special style of life or living, a praxis, before it is doctrine or statement. It is identical with the persons and the community formed by such living. It is en-fleshed in life and concretised in events before it can come to expression in words. The Word is born, not unborn. The unborn is God, Theos, Life and Reality, *Sat*. Only if the Theos, God, is there could there be a theo-logos, a word of God, a word about God. A theology living in history, affecting society and transforming people presupposes a Theos active in history, present in society and involved with people. Theos in history means a godly life led by persons and especially by communities. The life, the deed, the praxis has primacy. One finds this emphasis not only in James, but powerfully in the Synoptics, and most of all, surprisingly, in the 'mystical gospel' of John and John's letters.

b) Jesus claims to be the (spiritual) truth. His Person as moulded, fashioned and stamped by the particular life-style that was his, with its options, decisions and relationships, with its radicalness and its risks, is the religious truth. I am the truth, he said, not just my words. We can 'know' this truth neither by repeating the words he spoke nor by reciting the classical creeds christians composed later, but by living by his Breath (Jn. 20:22), by having his mind and attitude (Phil. 2:5-8) and by keeping his commandments, doing God's will, struggling for justice, and loving one

another in very concrete ways (Mt. 7:21-27; Jn. 8:32; 14:15-21; 15:10-17; I Jn. 3:16-18). Such life is the only authentic teaching authority, the only convincing testimony, the creative and re-creative truth. It is important to note how Jesus understands his own identity (Christology) in terms of life-giving services to the victims of an oppressive socio-religious system (Mt. 11:2-5; Mk. 3:1-6; Jn. 10:1-10). He defines our relation to him in terms of our obedience to God's will (Mk. 3:33-35). Saving, healthening, humanising relationship to the Reign of God consists not in allegiance to creed and cult but in the practice of mercy and justice which have priority over dogmas and rituals (Mt. 7:21-27; 25:31-46; 9:13; 12:7; 23:23; 5:23). Jesus settles all debates by referring to God's will and God's values; by having in mind "the things of God" (Mt. 16:23; Mk. 8:33). And the things of God are mercy, justice and fidelity, and love and community. That is why "religion" was no guarantee that the Jewish leaders would sense the truth of Jesus and honour it. Religion understood as temple, cult, sabbath, fasting, tithes, laws, and submission to authority/power was of little help. It is religion understood as spirituality or practice of compassion and justice and friendship and tenderness that matters in the realm of God. These values are transreligious, human and humanising.

c) That means the secular anthropological is the matrix of the theological. What the despised, heretical or unbelieving Samaritan did for the man broken and abandoned on the roadside is model for all who would love God and neighbour, rather than what the two religious persons who had preceded the Samaritan did (Lk. 10:25-37). In the Samaritan's response to the dying man God can recognize himself, not in the priest's, even if the priest, moved by compassion, had hurried to the temple to offer a sacrifice for the bleeding man on the roadside. What would the Samaritan do if on subsequent journeys he were to find a growing number of travellers robbed, beaten and left half-dead on the same sector of the road? Would he continue to take them all to the inn or would he search for the structural causes of the phenomenon and try to tackle them? Would God still recognize himself in such action for radical structural change? And would Jesus still point to the man and say. Do likewise? The Samaritan's action would then resemble the many struggles and movements we have recalled.

d) Where there is faith there is (at least some incipient) theology. Where there is implicit, latent faith, there is latent, implicit theology. There is implicit theological faith in whatever is marked by an authentic anthropological or human faith. Anthropological faith consists in faith in human beings, consists in the affirmation of their dignity and equality, their right to freedom and food, and participation in the making of their own future. It consists in the rejection of slavery, in resistance to conquest and subjugation. Such human faith is not only the test and criterion of theological faith but its mother, and its incarnate historical form. Commitment to human values is the sign that our Godward faith is authentic, that the God we say we believe in is the God of life and the Father of Jesus Christ rather than the god confessed by Jesus' killers and by all oppressors of the people; rather than the idol they were worshipping when they accused Jesus of blasphemy. The life of Jesus was a denial of the god whom the leaders served by killing Jesus. In relation to that god Jesus was an atheist. This atheism Jesus demanded as a precondition for reaching out to the living God who is the giver of life and the defender of life against all Cains, Pharaohs, Herods, Hitlers and Hiroshima-mongers. Jesus inculcated this atheism not only in the Samaritan story, but in his treatment of the sabbath, in his attitude to rules of purity and pollution, in his gathering of outcasts, his setting aside of temple and priest and sacrifice, and in the primacy he accorded to life and the celebration of life (Mk. 2:1 to 3:6; Lk. 13:10-17; Jn 5:1-15-21). Jesus rejects religious idolatry and urges faith. He rejects the theism which neglects the people and the world his Father loves and cares for. In the stories we have told and referred to Jesus may discern an anthropological faith; and we may discern within it a theology in process.

e) People's theology is theology from below, from the depressed situation, from the people's experience of suffering, from their struggles and hopes, from the perspective of their values. The masses love life and people, despite the fact that life for them has been full of deprivation and suffering. Therefore instead of despairing and giving up, they want and work for a different world. That is the meaning of the endless struggles of the people. There is an implicit faith here that our changeful and tearful life is horizoned by a Reality that is positive, beautiful and friendly, and is at work with us and through us to make the night yield stars, the

coal yield diamonds, the muddy pond yield a lotus flower. There is this undying hope laid up in the heart of the people and in the heart of their struggles. That is where people's theology grows. It comes to birth when people wake up to the truth of their condition, develop a critical consciousness, discern between justice and injustice, between true peace and the calm of structural violence, recognize their own dignity and their vocation to live as God's friends and co-workers in the fashioning of the New Age, the New Earth.

f) Here the primacy of events is affirmed over the primacy of texts. Academic traditions have been deriving theology from texts. People's theology, however, recognizes its foundations in events of history. It springs from events in which people share their work, their faith, their struggles and their life. In the biblical tradition the founding events are Abraham's migration, the Exodus from Egypt, the Cross of Jesus and his Resurrection. These originating events are made to interact with the events of people's enslavement and oppression, and with the events of people's organized revolts and liberation movements, and the crucifixion of the people and their uprisings and fragmentary resurrections. Then we ask: if in the biblical events God was involved and his designs for the world and his heart's dispositions were disclosed, is not God likewise present and involved and self-disclosing in the events of our day? God is faithful. If he loved and liberated people then, he loves and liberates people now. He who brought Israel from Egypt also brought Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir (Amos 9:7). God is just, he is *always* on the side of the oppressed.

g) To theologise is to know that God is active in our day, in our history, in all the struggles for justice, freedom and fellowship; and to join the significant movements and work at God's side. This would include discovering through study and analysis the changes and conversions which would move us closer to the New Age: changes in structures, social, economic, political and cultural as well as transformations in the structures of our thought and heart, our relationships and value systems. Analysis will reveal the existence of different, conflictual conceptions of reality. Different characters and classes can have divergent values and points of view. For the disciples the criterion for choice will be



"thinking the things of God" as against thinking the things of men (Mt. 16:23). That means we adopt God's evaluative point of view, the one by which Jesus lived. Healing the sick, bringing good news to the poor, opening prisons and setting the down-trodden free were for Jesus concrete expressions of this divine norm.

h) The problem some pose of moving from social analysis to theological reflection is a pseudo-problem. There is no dichotomy between the social and the spiritual-theological. No cartesian dilemma of crossing over from thought to the world and vice versa. The analysis is not made from some neutral, value-free 'vantage' point. Rather it is made from within a serious commitment to justice, to the cause of the people, to struggle for freedom, to radical social change and to the construction of a new earth. Such analysis is already theological. Marxism, for instance, is a sociology. But it includes a vision of the future with justice, equality and creative work. Above all this, the Human, made in God's image, with a thinking and free centre and endowed with creative imagination and a sense of justice and mystery, is a theological reality, both as individual persons and as participated existence in community. Human endeavours, decisions and relationships are secular with a sacred depth. The Divine is the depth reality of the authentically secular and human. Such is the structure of reality, including the reality of the struggles, revolts and insurrections which we have been sampling. The believer and the theologian are only articulating these depth dimensions of transformative human endeavours.

i) Hence it is that people who fight for freedom and struggle for justice are the subjects of theology. It is they that call it into being. They construct it. They must not therefore be handed over at any point of the process or journey to theological experts. People are already theological, and are the doers of theology, interpreting the Divine to the world in terms of freedom and justice, and making it possible for the Divine to take hold of the Earth, and for the Reign of God to become a social reality. Professional theologians and experts may not manipulate people's experience; they may not pose as owners of theology. They are welcome to be servants of the theology of the people by helping them to organise and articulate it.

## 7. Keep the Combat Human

People's struggles for justice and freedom are suffused with God's will to human wholeness. They are ultimately created and energized by the Spirit who is the Father/Mother of the poor, and by the Word who sets the downtrodden free. They are best seen as the historical embodiments or incarnations of God's word of human liberation and God's will to human completion. They interpret God to our history and to our own heart. The struggles are theological events. Articulating the theology latent in them serves to understand in depth the nature of the struggle, to see its affinity to ultimate realities and meanings, to sustain the hope of God's Reign on the Earth and to keep the combat human.

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## People's Theology: An Islamic Point of View

First of all we have to define what we mean by People's Theology? We do not want to go by any classical or formal definition. In fact no such definition exists. The theology evolved during medieval period, whatever the religion, had its own biases. With certain exceptions, theology meant to serve the interests of the powerful religious and political establishments. I do not say that these theologies were not based on convictions but based on interests alone. It would be too simplistic a formulation. These theologies were undoubtedly based on convictions more than on interests. However, vested interests have their own ways to use things for their own ends. We will elaborate our viewpoint.

The theology evolved during medieval ages had its own universe. Much was not known about the cosmos and its origin, its composition and its development. The scriptural texts, whether of the Bible or Quran or any other holy book, had their own idiom. The religious idiom, let it be noted, by its very nature is ambiguous and mystifying. It lacks clarity and that is its strength, not shortcoming. Clarity makes a statement limited to a certain spatio-temporal frame. Religious statement, on the other hand, transcends such a frame and thus ambiguity becomes its strength. Again, it is this ambiguity of a scriptural statement which lends it to different interpretations.

The medieval theologians, with certain exceptions as pointed out, lived in the medieval universe and hence interpreted the scriptural texts accordingly. They showed more interest in metaphysical questions in keeping with their ethos and interests. Also, they showed greater interest in ritualistic aspects of religion than in its value-aspects. Thus we see that existential questions interested them not so much as metaphysical questions or questions of

essence. Though all this was based, more often than not, on their convictions, ritualistic and metaphysical aspects of religion lent themselves more easily to exploitation by vested interests, be they associated with religious, economic or political establishments. Thus medieval theology became pre-eminently pro-elite rather than pro-people. Their priorities were very different. They were more concerned with other-worldly questions than what was happening here on earth.

It must also be pointed out here that primordial experience of founders of great religions in the world was more related to existential sufferings of humankind than to metaphysical questions though they did not neglect questions of *meaning and essence*. It can best be related by an anecdote from Buddha's life. Some Brahmins went to Buddha to discuss the question of the existence of God. Buddha, unmoved by the concern of the Brahmins, told them a story which ran like this: A hunter went out hunting to the jungles. When he saw a deer he aimed at it but missed the target and the arrow struck a woodchopper nearby who fell down letting out a shriek. The hunter realising his mistake rushed to save the woodchopper's life and tried to pull out the arrow from his body. The woodchopper, instead of allowing him to pull out the arrow, caught his hand and began asking him a series of questions: who are you? Why did you throw this arrow at me? what iron this arrow was made of? However, the hunter told the woodchopper 'I can answer all your questions but you will be dead before that. What is urgent right now is to take out the arrow from your body and heal your wound'.

The Buddha thus told the Brahmins that it is necessary first to remove suffering here on earth before we discuss questions related to God and His nature and the purpose of His creation of this universe. We have reversed the priorities, he said. Thus in Buddhism removal of suffering, *dukkha* became central. Buddha's primordial experience was related to suffering and its removal and he prescribed the eightfold path to achieve it, which included right thinking and right action. If we think and act in the right way there will be no exploitation and consequently no suffering on earth. However, soon after the death of Buddha the meaning of *dukkha* began to change and with the embracing of Buddhism by Ashoka, it became a state religion, associated with powerful



establishment, and its liberative thrust became blunted. The *dukkha* (suffering) now acquired a meta-physical meaning alone and *nirvāṇa* (liberation) became purely a spiritual concept. The primordial experience of Buddha became diffused in the New Buddhist theology which was more heavily weighted in favour of vague metaphysical questions than the questions of existential suffering as Buddha had himself emphasised.

Neither Christianity nor Islam is an exemption to such developments. Christ hated money-lenders and Muhammad opposed every form of exploitation and the holy scripture of Islam prohibited *riba* which, in its broadest sense, can be taken to mean economic exploitation in every form. But, in both these religions powerful vested interests developed soon and their liberative thrust was lost. However, occasionally, the oppressed did revolt and asserted the primordial liberative thrust but succeeded only temporarily. The sects so formed were denounced as heretical and hence could never become part of the mainstream theology. Such sects, representing the interests of the oppressed, could be termed as representing People's Theology in their own time. Thus the theology which concerns itself more with existential suffering and represents the viewpoint of the oppressed, can be called People's Theology. It must, however, be emphasised that People's Theology does not, and should not, delink itself with questions of metaphysical nature, meaning of life, life after death, creation of cosmos, accountability to divine laws etc. Also, it should be based on scriptural text and nothing else though its interpretation, in view of ambiguity of text, could be radically different from the orthodox theological interpretations. In other words, though based on the divine text (and in the case of Islam also on authentic *hadith*, the words and deeds of the holy Prophet), people's theology should have different concerns and priorities. It should accord priority to questions of existential suffering, and divine ways and means to end this suffering. In other words, it should give priority to the point of view of the oppressed.

If we examine the Meccan surahs of the holy Quran it would be seen that it is primarily concerned with the fate of the oppressed — the slaves, the widows, the orphans, the indebted and the poor. The early Quranic verses — representing the primordial experience of the Prophet — express deep concern about

these sections of the society (see for example the early Quranic verses 104:1-7, 102:1-11, 107:1-7 etc.). In the later Medinese verses though other questions come to the fore, the primacy for the poor, widows, orphans, slaves and the indebted remains. Accumulation of wealth is not only discouraged, it is strongly denounced (see verse 9:34). It is also said that the believers should give away to the needy what is in excess of one's own needs (see verse 2:219).

Also, *zakah* is very central to Islamic theology, so central that it remains one of the five pillars of orthodox Islam. *Zakah* is the poor tax and could be as high as necessary (though the Prophet fixed it as 2.5% of one's wealth and income in the context of his times the Quran in the verse 2:219 cited above requires all that is surplus after meeting one's basic needs to be given away). The *zakah* money collected by the (Islamic) state is to be spent for the poor and oppressed. The Quran says: "*Zakat* is only for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer it, and those whose hearts are made to incline (to truth), and (to free) the captives, and those in debt, and in the way of Allah and for the wayfarer — thus is it ordained by God. And God is full of knowledge and wisdom" (9:60).

Mark the words *poor and needy, captives (slaves or those in bondage or also war prisoners), those in debt*. They all belong to the oppressed categories; they are all exploited economically, marginalised by the society and left to fend for themselves. The Quran, however, does not neglect them. Far from it. It shows deep concern for their fate. It makes it obligatory (*faridatan min Allah*) on the believers to be deeply concerned about those marginalised by the society. It even exhorts them to give away what is left as surplus with them (2:219). Thus it is not only in early Meccan period that Islam remains concerned with the poor, needy and the oppressed but the concern for them remains in the Medinese period too though in this period the Muslims were faced with a host of other important questions.

The concept of *zakah* in the Quranic theology is not merely a question of charity. It is much more than that. It may be construed as charity in certain social context but it is pregnant with all those possibilities which can be employed to improve the fate of these oppressed people of the society. Be it in the form of

charity, be it in the form of redistribution of wealth through state institutions or be it through controlling the commanding heights of economy or through planned economic development or through adopting alternate developmental model suited to the needs of the masses of people. It will all depend on the external conditions and spatio-temporal requirements. It would be wrong to adopt rigid doctrinaire position. What is most important is social justice measured by well established and objective parameters and not any developmental model. Charity will also retain its place in any society; even in a society where social justice is ensured for the oppressed. But it may be required for different reasons like helping the victims of natural disaster like flood or earthquakes or similar other causes.

It should also be noted that Islamic theology does not totally ban private ownership, property and trade. However, it puts serious limitations on it. These limitations are governed by two doctrines. Firstly, exploitative practices should not be resorted to. The holy Quran has used the word *riba* for exploitative practices. *Riba* literally means growth and any growth for which no labour is involved or others' labour is appropriated is called *riba* in the Quranic terminology. Appropriation of others' labour which is the seminal form of exploitation in capitalist system is not permitted in Islam. The Quranic doctrine is "there is nothing for human being except what is strived for" (39:53). What one earns by one's own labour legitimately belongs to him; appropriation of others' labour is prohibited.

*Riba* should thus mean not only interest or usury — which is one form of exploitative practice — but exploitation in general including misappropriation of others' labour. The Quran permits *bay'* (trade) and contrasts it with *riba* (2:275). In trading one puts not only capital but also one's own labour, and profit according to the Quranic doctrine should not exceed the amount of labour put in. Any profit in excess thereof would be treated as illegitimate. One can get only what one has worked for, nothing more, nothing less. Thus it will be seen that the Quran does not permit compensation for entrepreneurship which again is a cardinal principle of capitalist system and one of the instruments of exploitation. Though Islam permits profit as pointed out, it does not permit any unearned profit which touches dimension of exploitation.

In other words it permits profit for need and not profit for greed.

It is in this spirit that the Prophet prohibited sharecropping which is an important form of exploitation in a feudal economy. The land should be cultivated by the owner failing which it should be given to one who wishes to cultivate it. There are many *ahadith* (traditions) to this effect. In Islamic terminology sharecropping is referred to as *mukhabira* or *muhaqula*. Here also the underlying principle is that only what is earned through one's own labour is legitimate as it does not involve exploitation of others' labour.

However, in orthodox theology this principle of earning through one's own labour got de-emphasised and limited only to prohibition of interest. In people's theology this principle will have a strong presence. Anything appropriated based on others' labour shall be treated as *haram*, i. e., strictly prohibited. Exploitation of others is so strictly prohibited that those who violate this principle should be prepared for war with Allah and His Messenger and this verse ends saying "Deal not unjustly, and you shall not be dealt with unjustly" (2:279). The strong denunciation of *riba* by the Quran sums up Islam's attitude towards exploitative system. However, traditional theology unfortunately limited the scope of *riba* to interest or usury and thus legitimised other exploitative practices like appropriation of others' labour in an industrial economy. For them ownership became more sacred than the way it was acquired. However, in people's theology the scope of *riba* will have to be widened to include all forms of exploitative practices in the modern capitalist economy. It should also be understood that modes of exploitation in a modern capitalist economy are very different from those in a principally trade economy as it obtained during the Prophet's time in Arabia.

Also, Islam has emphasised the doctrine that *maslaha-e-'ammah* (i. e., common welfare) takes precedence over *maslaha-e-khassa* (private welfare or welfare of the few). This doctrine has been formulated by the 14th century thinker and theologian Imam Ibn Taymiyyah. It is important to note that a medieval orthodox theologian came out with this doctrine. The people's awareness of their rights was not as sharp then as it is today under capitalistic and democratic dispensation. This doctrine thus acquires



added significance today to build people's theology. Under this doctrine private property exceeding certain legitimate limits can be acquired for common welfare.

Another important dimension of exploitative capitalist economy is that it promotes unbridled consumerism. In fact it thrives on it. Consumerism turns out to be highly exploitative as in the third world context only the elites can indulge in it at the cost of marginalised masses and the first world as a whole indulges in it at the cost of the poor masses in the third world. The Islamic theology even traditional one—discourages consumerism. The Muslim theologians are unanimous that the Prophet disapproved the use of silk and gold for men. These were items of luxury in the then social context. There are ahadith that the companions of the Prophet refused to drink water from a silver cup as the Prophet disallowed that. Similarly use of silk and gold was strictly regulated in the *shariah*. Islam thereby gave clear indication that the faithful should not indulge in consumerism and that surplus wealth, if any, should be redistributed so as to take care of the weaker sections of the community.

Thus in today's context, people's theology would emphasise production of a package of wage goods so as to fulfil the needs of those sections of the society. A basket of wage goods could be so designed as to fulfil the basic needs of workers and other categories of employees. At least this production will have priority over the production of other goods. Also, consumerism is being promoted without any regard to non-renewable natural resources which again marginalises tribal and other groups living traditionally on these resources.

The Quran also states that it is the weaker sections who shall inherit this earth (28:5). Hence it is these sections who will shape the economy which will be in their interest, not in the interest of the rich and the powerful (the Quran calls them *mustakbirun*). Today in our own economy billions of rupees are being invested in big industries catering to the rich and also in big dams submerging lands belonging to the poor peasants and tribals (*mustad'ifun*, weaker sections of the society) without so much as resettling them properly. Thus it will be seen that the whole model of development is weighted heavily in favour of the rich. There is certainly no place for such exploitative model of development in Islamic theology.

The Quran has no sympathy with the ruling classes in the society. It uses the word *mala'* for the ruling classes, the leaders of the society. The *mala'* never responded to the Prophet's call to join the community of the believers (in just society and in causes dear to Allah and His messengers). The Biblical and the Quranic Prophets always belonged to the weaker sections of society and never emerged from the ruling classes. The *mala'* held them in contempt for belonging to the disinherited strata of the society. The Quran repeatedly records the dialogue between the powerful leaders and the prophet and the community of believers. In one of the verses the Quran says, "The leaders of the powerful party among his people said to those who were powerless — those among them who believed: 'Know you indeed that Salih (one of the messengers of God) is an apostle from his Lord?' They said: 'We do indeed believe in the revelation which has been sent through him'. The powerful party (then) said: 'For our part we reject what you believe in'" (7:75).

The powerful and the arrogant not only rejected the message brought by Salih, the apostle of God, but also in their sheer arrogance deprived the weak and the oppressed of their means of livelihood by killing the she-camel belonging to the apostle. Here, in the symbolic language of the Quran she-camel stands for the means of livelihood of the apostle of Allah and his community of believers — the oppressed. After killing the she-camel, the powerful, the rich said: "O Salih: bring about thy threats, if thou art an apostle (of God). "So the earthquake took them unawares and they lay prostrate in their homes in the morning". (7:77-78) Here earthquake should also be taken as a symbol of revolution which shakes the whole social structure and the powerful are humbled by the oppressed. Thus if justice is not done to the oppressed masses and they continue to be deprived of their means of livelihood, as is happening in our economic system, the oppressed will rise in revolt and cause earthquake for the rich and arrogant and all old structures and their most powerful leaders will come tumbling down.

We find this warning repeated at several places in the holy Quran: Prophet after prophet warning the rich and the arrogant and the latter contemptuously rejecting this warning and then facing wrath of Allah. For example see 7:59-137; 10:71-93; 11:25-102;

10:91. In some of the Meccan verses it is described more vividly. Just examine the following verses of chapter 101:

“The Day of Noise and Clamour: What is the (Day) of Noise and Clamour? And what will explain to thee what the (Day) of Noise and Clamour is? (It is) a Day whereon people will be like scattered moths. And the mountains will be carded wool. Then, he whose balance (of good deeds) will be (found) heavy, will be in a life of good pleasure and satisfaction. But he whose balance (of good deeds) will be (found) light, will have his home in a (bottomless) pit.” (101:1-9)

It will be noticed that the language is symbolic and hence ambiguous. But to a discerning reader it is evident that the holy book is talking here about the day when exploiters, oppressors and tyrants will face the anger of the people. It would be the day of reckoning for them. They will be scattered like moths all around and those who considered themselves firm like mountains will become like carded wool. Mountains here refer to those giant like tyrants who thought no one could ever challenge them. They will be reduced to carded wool and scattered. Only those who worked for the good of the common people and were just and truthful will be saved from people's wrath, but those whose deeds were unjust and those exploited others will be thrown into bottomless pit.

Thus we see that the Quran uses very powerful similes and metaphors to condemn exploiters and oppressors of the people. Again in chapter 102 it addresses those who are affluent and negligent of the sufferings of the poor and needy and also become neglectful of the spiritual side of life. The Quran addresses such people and says, “Piling up (of wealth) diverts you. Until you come to the graves. Nay, you will soon know (the consequences of piling up of wealth). Nay, again you will soon know. Nay, would that you know with a certain knowledge! You will certainly see hell. Then you will see it with certainty of sight. Then on that day you shall certainly be questioned about the joy (you indulged in)” (102:1-8).

Here too the holy Quran warns the rich and the powerful. Their riches and piling up of wealth has made them arrogant and insensitive to the suffering of others and this insensitivity prevails until they visit their graves. In other words this insensitivity to

others' suffering proves to be their doom. Had they known with certainty what the result of their enjoying life would be without being sensitive to others' suffering, perhaps they would not have shown such negligence (to others' suffering). But they never believe in their doom or in the day of reckoning until they meet that fate and see with their own eyes what they were warned about by Allah and His messengers. They simply ridiculed these messengers as of lowly origin and of no consequence.

It will thus be seen that the Quranic theology is deeply concerned with the poor and needy and wants to usher in a just society where there will be no exploitation and suffering. It wants people to be extremely sensitive to the sufferings of others and fight to end exploitation and oppression. It thus says, "And what reason have you not to fight in the way of Allah for the oppressed from amongst men and women and children, who say: Our Lord, take us out of this town, whose people are oppressors, and grant us from Thee a friend, and grant us from Thee a helper!" (4:75)

Thus if there is oppression and exploitation of people in a country it is the duty of the people of Allah to be sensitive to their sufferings and fight for their cause and liberate them from their sufferings like a friend and like a helper. To be insensitive to others' suffering is to neglect the duty enjoined by Allah on the faithful. To have faith in Allah is to have faith in justice as Allah is 'Adil (Just) and that faith which does not motivate the faithful to action is at best a lifeless faith. Thus no faithful (*m'umin*) who does not struggle for a just society can be worthy of his/her faith. The above Quranic verse clearly enjoins upon the faithful to actively involve themselves in all people's movements directed at ending injustices in various forms. A faithful has thus to play an active and dynamic role in movements for social justice. He has to be pro-people. He has to play Moses to every Pharaoh.

It is unfortunate that Islamic theology strayed from this path and played pro-establishment role once monarchy was established in Islamic society which was totally anti-monarchic in its spirit. The mainstream theology concerned itself more with rituals and metaphysical questions and formalistic piety in the post-caliphate period. The four Caliphs after the death of the holy Prophet struggled hard to enforce social justice as rigorously as



possible. However, this enterprise could not sustain itself for long in view of flood of wealth which accrued to Muslim society by conquest of mighty empires of Byzantium and Persia. The true spirit of Islam was drowned soon in this sea of wealth and monarchical forces consolidated themselves. An attempt by Imam Husain, the grandson of the Prophet to challenge monarchy did not succeed (though it left behind a great and noble example of going down fighting for true Islamic spirit which inspired millions of Muslims through ages) and theology, after initial resistance, allowed itself to be coopted by the mighty establishment and thus lost its revolutionary thrust.

It is highly necessary to rediscover this revolutionary spirit to develop people's theology in the modern context.

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## **People's Theology - a Woman's Perspective**

Theology is an attempt of the human intellect to articulate what the human consciousness has intuited of the Divine Reality revealed in the lived experiences of people, with a view to orientate human behaviour towards total liberation and build up the civilisation of love. As the human consciousness evolves to a deeper experience of Reality and the intellectual capacities grow, theology also progresses. Therefore at no time in history, theology can become complacent and say that it has the whole truth. In a world of becoming in which everything is in the process of evolving, a theologian speaking in terms of finality will be a queer phenomenon indeed. Christ Himself said, "I have yet many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (Jn. 16:12-13).

Christian theology should essentially be people's theology because the experiences of the Divine that led to its origin and that of its parent religion Yahwism were not those of individuals but of groups of people. A group of bonded labourers in Egypt experienced the liberating intervention of Yahweh. As a people they underwent the experience of the covenant that raised them to the status of people of God. A group of people experienced the public life, death and resurrection of Christ and received the Spirit that liberated them from the limitations of the Mosaic law. So the articulation of this experience and building up of a human society based on it also should be done by people. But unfortunately from the time the people of Israel who left Egypt were counted, leaving out women and children, to our own times when the official magisterium publishes the decision against the ordination of women to priesthood saying that women as a class cannot be priests because they are not fit to represent Christ, theology has deplorably been men's theology.

A religion originates with a gripping, transforming experience of the Divine and as such has a great deal of liberating force in it. After a time, for the sake of better administration and expansion, it becomes more organised. Once, from being a liberating movement it becomes an institution, though it still has its original liberating force, it becomes more concerned with its own perpetuation and expansion. Then, like any other secular organisation, it starts being the breeding ground of oppressive structures. It is then that theology runs the risk of deteriorating into mere rationalisation which by its mental gymnastics could prove even structures of sin to be divine institutions. This has happened to christian theology and it affects the very nature of the church as the sacrament of Christ's liberating presence in the world. Instead of mediating Christ's liberating presence and salvation to all the peoples, it can work hand in glove with the oppressive structures in society.

Theologians base themselves on the Scriptures which were written under the inspiration of the Spirit and contain God's revelation for us. The human writers were people of their time and culture and so they gave the divine message to us clothed in the knowledge of their time and in the customs and prejudices of their culture. Just as form and redaction criticism have come to stay as tools of exegesis, sifting the divine message from the cultural elements also must be developed into a skill so that it can be used as an efficient tool in scriptural exegesis. It is an urgent need if theology is to be honest to itself as the humble search for revealed truth.

The priestly account of creation says:

"God created man into his own image  
in the image of God, he created him  
male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27).

In this verse built up in synthetic parallelism, the thought began in the first line, repeated in synonymous parallelism in the second line is completed in the third. The message that God created both man and woman equally in the divine image is clear. But what made St. Paul say that man "is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man" (1 Cor. 11-7)? It is merely the Jewish patriarchal cultural element seen as a divine institution.

When Moses asked for God's name, he was told "I am who am" (Ex. 3:14). Whatever it means, certainly it cannot be

inferred from it, that God is a male. But the male Jewish theologians made God a 'he'. Following the example of its parent religion Yahwism, Christianity also has its all-male Trinity. Sometimes the Spirit is given the neuter pronoun 'it'. A divine neuter is far more theologically acceptable than a divine feminine. Even a dove is a noble symbol for God but not a woman. If some one ventures to speak of the feminine image of God, then there is a hue and cry that sex is being attributed to God who is a pure Spirit. By what magic Jewish and Christian theology render the pronoun 'he' and the terms Father and Son sexless is beyond one's comprehension.

This all-male concept of God affects the Christian life of the people very radically. In religions that have male and female images of God, when a human person experiences spousal relationship with God, it is a highly enobling experience. The human person experiences an all-suffusing tenderness towards the divine lover on a basis of equality and it elevates and expands the human consciousness and prepares it for mystical union. In the Bible, leaving out the short Song of Songs, the prophetic literature speaks at length about the spousal relationship between Yahweh and Israel. It is hardly complimentary to the human person. While the divine lover's compassionate love and fidelity are emphasised, the human partner, if not held on tight rope, is ever on the look out to run after her many lovers. St. Paul transfers the same symbol to Christ's relationship to the church. The church has to be washed, purified and her wrinkles straightened out in order to be taken up as the bride by the divine bridegroom. How utterly degrading it is when the same symbolism is applied to two human persons united in marriage — the husband compared to the divine Lord and the wife to the sinful church. On their wedding day, every Christian couple is given this model, the husband identifying himself with the Lord is given the mandate to keep his weak wife in place and the wife recognising her weakness to be submissive to her lord. Since in the Christian concept of God there is no divine feminine, in the world of humans, the women do not have divine image in them !

The Yahwist, the author of the second creation account, living in the early monarchical period designs his story especially to bring about the equality of the sexes. He considers the king's harems with hundreds of wives and concubines as cattle in the



shed as a sinful state. So he imagines the origin of human society in its sinlessness with one man and one woman. The loneliness in the midst of a multitude of helpful animals; the ecstasy of finding companionship in seeing one woman; and the strange statement of a custom never practised in Israel, "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24); all these are geared to give the message that in the world as God created it man and woman are equal. Using the aetiology to explain why the rib cage covers only half of human torso, he goes to the extent of saying that half of man's rib cage had gone to the making of the woman's body. So the one human torso is made into male and female. According to the Yahwist, male domination is the result of sin and therefore points to the sinful state of human life.

Even to describe the nature of the first sin, the Yahwist weaves up his story from the material he got from the events of his time. The tempter is the fertility god who was a perennial seducer of Israel. The seducer reaching man through woman is also Israel's history not because women were weak but because the fertility gods belonged to the foreign women whom Yahweh had forbidden the Israelites to marry. At the time this story was written, ignoring God's commandment, king Solomon married foreign women and built temples for their gods. This downfall of Israel's wisest leader is symbolically retold as the story of the fall. The culprit is the man who was the recipient of God's law and chose to ignore it for the sake of his woman. But what rationalisations were done in the name of theology to paint a very base image of woman by the Jewish theologians! The socialisation of girls and the religious law designed to fit women into this image etched this mean image indelibly into women's psyche so much so that they accepted their lot as a divine institution and built their self image on this foundation.

This image of woman was transferred to Christianity in a seemingly dogmatic way through the Pauline letters (1 Cor. 11: 5-6; 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-15). In these passages St. Paul brings out his expertise in rabbinical theologising and shows himself to be more a student of Gamaliel than a disciple of Christ.

At the very beginning of Israel's history, when they departed from Egypt, Miriam was a prophetess and she was the first

one to articulate Israel's experience of liberation (Ex. 15:20-21). But the later priestly theologian, keen on preserving male leadership, used a longer song and attributed it to Moses (Ex. 15:1-8). At the time of the early settlement in Canaan, when leadership in Israel was purely charismatic, Deborah was a prophetess who judged Israel (Jud. 4). So God is not partial calling or giving his mission only to men. But it is interesting to see what the priestly theologian made out of Mirium's leadership. In Num. 12 Mirium raises her voice together with Aaron against Moses' marrying the Cushite woman. Mirium is acting as a true prophet voicing God's commandment not to intermarry with the foreigners. But the priestly theologian makes out of it a case of jealousy and Mirium is punished with leprosy. Aaron the priest goes free of course. In this episode, the priestly theologian's anxiety, not only to reduce the guilt of Aaron but to suppress feminine leadership is quite obvious. When St. Paul gives very strict orders to Timothy to keep women submissive in church life saying, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent" (1 Tim. 2:12), is he also expressing a similar anxiety over emerging women leadership in the Church which he wanted, to be nipped in the bud?

Jesus liberates women from the sex roles imposed on her by the society. In the house of Martha and Mary, Martha stands for the traditional role of woman, serving the preacher by cooking for him while Mary represents discipleship in the fullest sense. Jesus would not allow her to be dragged into the traditional role and his approbation of the emerging role of woman as one who could discuss a new religious vision with a man is very clear. "Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away from her" (Lk. 10:42). But the male theologians failed to see the liberating message of the Scripture. Instead, they found in the two sisters images of active and contemplative forms of religious life — a concern that did not exist at the time when the gospel was written.

Since in the Church, the sacramental ministry, jurisdiction, official teaching, decision making, administration, in fact the entire life is male determined, the Scriptures are read from the dominant male perspective. In the Church of Christ, men rule and women work. It is a more cruel oppression than what is in secular society

because here it is dogmatic oppression — putting forward God as the originator of the structures of oppression and putting forward a biblical theology well tailored to justify and strengthen them. The principle of the Incarnation is “like his brethren in every respect” (Heb. 2:17) except sin (Heb. 4:15). But the Church’s attitude at times seems to be ‘different in all things except sin’ — so reluctant towards inculturation in theology, liturgy and lifestyle yet unquestioningly absorbing the structures of sin in society like caste and communal discriminations, oppression of women and oppressive institutional structures.

In the document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (15 Oct. 1976) against the ordination of women it is said that man alone could represent Christ.

The whole sacramental economy is in fact based on natural signs, on symbols imprinted upon human psychology. “Sacramental signs”, says St. Thomas, “represents what they signify by natural resemblance”.

“The same natural resemblance is required for persons as things: When Christ’s role in the Eucharist is to be represented sacramentally, there would not be this “natural resemblance” which exists between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by man. In such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister, the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man” (No. 5. p.4).

In the celebration of the Eucharist, the priest is not a sacramental sign of Christ but only represents Christ. To be more precise, in scholastic terminology, he is the instrumental cause. We are living in an age in which representations and delegations are common occurrences and similarity on the basis of sex is not counted as a requisite in these. The same thing can be said of instrumental cause also. So when the Church says that only man can represent Christ because of the similarity of sex, it is giving its own stand built on social prejudices the appearance of theological truth. Moreover if we apply the rule of natural resemblance, in what way a small papery wafer put on the tongue has a natural resemblance to a meal? Such a resemblance is a requirement for the sacrament of the Eucharist. But we are mentally conditioned into thinking that we have had a meal because the wafer however tiny it may be, is made of wheat and though the priest alone has

a drink which is denied to the congregation. This only goes to prove that the Church can see a natural resemblance if and when it wants to. But a woman who shares the same human nature with Christ, is given participation in his divine nature through grace, died and has risen with him in baptism (Rom. 6:4), has put on Christ (Gal. 3:27) and is conformed to his image (Rom. 8:29) is said to be unqualified to represent Christ. In the Risen Christ is sex such an important factor as the sacred Congregation proposes? When the case of a woman who married seven brothers was proposed to Christ and he was asked whose wife she would be at the resurrection, (obviously in their minds, the Jewish custom of one man having many wives did not create any problem at the resurrection) he said, "you are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they shall neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:30). Commenting on this passage, the document says, "this text does not mean that the distinction between man and woman in so far as it determines the identity proper to person is suppressed in the glorious state" (No. 5. p. 7). It does not mean that the sexual distinction will be suppressed but certainly it means that it will be transcended. While speaking of resurrection, St. Paul says, "The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45).

The document in No. 6. p. 5 says that the priesthood does not form part of the rights of the individual. The message is, I suppose, that therefore women should not claim it. In so far as it involves divine vocation, it is not part of the rights of any individual either man or woman. But in so far as it concerns the response of the individual called by God, it is the freedom of the individual to decide to respond or not. To deny a group of persons the right to respond is oppression. Did not St. Peter recognise "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality" (Acts. 10.34)? Later when he explained to his Jewish companions the baptism of Cornelius household, did he not make it clear that God's gifts are not to be restricted by social discriminations? "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" (Acts. 11.17) In Jesus all discriminating walls crumbled down as St. Paul says in Gal. 3:28, "There is neither Jew



nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus".

The document seems to base its entire argument on the assumption that Jesus never ordained women and the fact that there had been a universal unbroken tradition of male priests only. The question whether Jesus ordained women or not is irrelevant because when Christianity was still a movement, there **does** not seem to be in the consciousness of the apostles themselves that they were ordained to cultic priesthood. They wanted to have deacons because they felt, "it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" (Acts 6:2). In the New Testament, the word priest stands for the members of the levitical priesthood and the negative attitude of the infant Church towards them is quite obvious. It is in the letter to the Hebrews that Jesus is called the high priest for the first time. In this epistle, two points stand out clearly — firstly the complete eradication of the priestly class. When the writer of the epistle claims that the levitical priesthood has become obsolete, nowhere it says that it is replaced by the Christian cultic priestly class. Secondly Christ is the one and only eternal high priest. "The former priests were many in number because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him since he always makes intercession for them (Heb. 7:23-25).

According to the letter to the Hebrews, Christ is a high priest who is "holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need like those high priests to offer sacrifices daily for his own sins and then those of the people (Heb. 7:26-27). If this is the scriptural image of Christ the Priest, how can any man be presumed to be "in persona Christi" (No. 5, p. 8) on the only resemblance of being the same sex as Christ?

The apostles understood themselves as a group of eyewitnesses commissioned by Christ to preach what they had seen and heard. The apostles did not include women among them because among the Jews, a woman's witness had no value. If we think that the apostles were ordained at the last supper, it is difficult to believe that the women disciples were not with them at the meal,

They were in Jerusalem at that time because we see them at the crucifixion scene the next day. Since they were in Jerusalem, it would be strange if they had not joined the men group for the pass-over meal which according to the Jewish custom was a family meal. Counting only the twelve seems to be more the Jewish custom of counting, leaving out women and children, and it is interesting to note that this custom had been recorded in connection with another significant messianic meal, the multiplication of loaves.

The Eucharistic assemblies in the early church were of the form of covenant meal in the context of which Jesus instituted the sacrament. In the Jewish home, the patriarch of the family presided over the meal and said the anaphora. The episkopoi (overseers) and the presbyteroi (elders) were the leaders of the Christian communities and their primary obligation was to keep the Christian community faithful to the apostolic kerygma. It is as leaders of the communities that they presided over the Eucharistic assemblies. In the pastoral letters of St. Paul we find the terms presbyteroi and episkopoi used interchangeably and at times referring to the same persons (Acts 20:17; 20:28). So to read into the pastorals the meaning the terms have today is anachronism.

But the metamorphosis of the Christian leadership into cultic priesthood took place quite early and became well established quickly. Clement I in his letter to the Corinthians (96) compares the episcopoi to the levitical priestly hierarchy. In the epistles of St. Ignatius the martyr (died in A. D. 117) we find a well organised priestly hierarchy with power to rule, similar to Roman administrative system. It is a sign that Christianity which began in its founder as a movement concerned with building up the kingdom of God by bringing about ideological and behavioural change in society was settling down into an institution concerned with its own perpetuation and expansion. After Constantine's Edict of Milan giving religious freedom to the Church the priestly hierarchy took on a very close resemblance to the secular power structure. The document says that the unbroken universal tradition of male priesthood is normative. If male priesthood is taught in the church as a divine institution and women till recently had no access to theological knowledge, how this tradition could have ever been questioned? Moreover the critical study of the scripture itself is something that happened only recently in the Church.

A great contributing factor to the low image of woman in the Church is the Mary/Eve antithesis in patristic writings. St. Paul speaks about the entrance of sin and death into the world through Adam and grace and life through Christ (Rom.5). Though St. Paul writes at length about this Adam/Christ antithesis, the male theologians saw to it that this did not spoil the image of man. So even in discussion on original sin Adam stands out more as a symbol of human solidarity than of sin. But an elaborate treatise was built on Eve/Mary antithesis by making Eve a sex symbol and embodiment of weakness or seduction. Mary is glorious because she is different from other women, all of whom are daughters of Eve and in every way are like her.

The document on the Role of Women in Evangelisation issued by the Pastoral commission of The Congregation of Evangelisation of Peoples (July 1976) says "It is man's nature to have ideas, it is woman's to act". Church's attitude towards women and the way they are treated are built on this unjust ideology. Just as action depends on ideology, women are kept in complete dependence on men in all the aspects of Church's life. This statement makes us wonder if we are still living in the early times when the Roman society had the patricians to think and the plebians to work to give them leisure.

Till recent years, Mariology was a great theological tragedy and to some extent it remains so even today. She was praised to the skies for her passive role — as the humble, passive recipient of God's graces. A long list of such graces was worked out purely on the principle 'it was possible, it was fitting and so it was done'. Removed from among humans, raised to the skies, the image of the mother of God was created to fulfil the human longing for the feminine image of God. Her glory was made to depend on how different she was from other women. Her active response to the salvific plan of God and how from being a member of the oppressed Jewish womanhood, by her courageous faith-journey she became the type of renewed humanity, was discounted. Her total receptivity is inseparable from her complete response. With full consciousness of her responsibility, she assumed her role in ushering in a new world order in which woman has complete personhood independent of man. In her every human person sees the beautiful image of what he/she hopes and desires to be — a fully liberated person.

Jesus discarded the cultural and ritual uncleanness attributed to women's menstruation when he made the woman, healed of the issue of blood, publicly confess the healing she got by touching him. But the Church still holding on to primitive and prescientific ideas forbids women to enter the sanctuary as the Jewish women were forbidden to enter the court of Israel. Jesus discussed theology with women who seem to understand him much more quickly than the apostles (Samaritan woman, Mary in her house, Martha near the tomb of Lazarus). But the Church appropriates theological thinking and dogmatic decisions only to men. Jesus commissioned women to proclaim the good news of his resurrection and later at the Pentecost poured forth the Spirit on women and men alike. But the apostolic college of men discounted their witnessing by not believing it and later silencing them took up all the witnessing work to themselves. The attitude of the apostles formed by the Jewish cultural prejudices is understandable. But the attitude of the late 20th century Church is baffling. In God's plan a woman brought into the world the Body and Blood of Christ. But the Church disqualifies women to bring the sacramental presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in a liturgical assembly.

The Church will continue to evolve such a theology of convenience as long as it considers, theology, administration in the Church and priesthood as prerogatives of men only. For all the injustices towards women in society, the Church has a moral responsibility, since it advocates an ideology which it calls theology that denies full personhood to women. It is strange that in the Church which is given a female image, women do not belong.

A theologian must have the openness to see and grasp God's revelation in the signs of the times and the struggles and experiences of the people. It is in this that Mary is our beautiful model. From the time of the annunciation what happened in her life was very different from the Jewish messianic theology of her time. But she was ever vigilant to observe, reflect, understand and accept what was happening in her and in her Son. Thus she became the perfect Christian from being the perfect Jewess. May she the Seat of Wisdom help us to grasp the Divine mysteries revealed in the experience of life.



# Responses

## 1. Response of George Koonthanam to Samuel Rayan's Paper

This is an appreciation of and a complement to the erudite and inspiring paper of Samuel Rayan rather than a response to it. Fr. Samuel singled out the Exodus event from the O.T. for more detailed comments. Even before the Exodus, the progenitors of the chosen people, the Patriarchs invoked and therefore experienced God as a family-god, tribal or nomadic god, God of the rootless landless Patriarchal tribes. This "God of the Fathers" would bless and make them great in an earthy way by giving them land and progeny, blessings which can be appreciated in full only by people who are landless and therefore rootless! God thus enters into history as the God of the poor and religion began as a movement towards land, strength and security for the hapless.

Then comes the faith-founding event of the Exodus, where the once nameless God of the Fathers, the God of the rootless landless people defined himself as intense activity on behalf of the slaves. This name Yahweh(= I am activity ever intense for liberating my people who are slaves) is to be his for all generations to come (Ex. 3:15); and hence nobody has the right to give him another name or definition, be it *Sachitananda*, *motor immobilis*, *Summum Bonum*, *prime cause*, or give him attributes like omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient etc.! Religion and theology meant resistance to and fight against exploitation and slavery. The human compassion of the midwives, the equally human compassion of the daughter of Pharaoh, the shrewdness of the mother and the sister of Moses, the naturally human indignation of Moses at the sight of an Egyptian, oppressing a Hebrew slave and later on at the sight of shepherds chasing away the seven daughters of Jethro, are all virtues without theological tinge and trappings.

Morality of the practice of that religion – fight and struggle for freedom – was determined in terms of expediency for their cause.

The God of the wilderness, of the conquest and settlement was also a God earthy to the core. During the 200 years or so of the Tribal League, he was again saviour and liberator through military valour. When kings began to reign and the slavery of Egypt returned to the people in Palestine, God thundered through the prophets, again as champion of the downtrodden. In the exile, the God of Exodus comes back to history repatriating the stricken, smitten remnant. In the fullness of time, as we are accustomed to say, God appeared in the person of the carpenter from Nazareth and the identity of God is given the clearest possible expression.

Two observations: there is no God but that is enfleshed in the struggles of the poor. The God of the O. T. is *Deus pauperibus*, a God wholly, totally, entirely, completely, fully for the poor, with the poor on the side of the poor. Secondly, there is no universal people of God, embracing the entire humanity, but the poor, and only the poor, are God's people (cf. Is 3:15; Ps. 72:2; Ez. 34:19). The logical inference would be: all authentic theology is theology of the poor, by the poor, for the poor. Consequently, every theology developed outside the struggles of the poor is sham theology; it will be the theology of the bourgeois, of the oppressors, high-ups, clergy and the church establishment. Such a palace theology is the theology of the rich, for the rich, by the rich and against the poor. In the religious history of Israel we see how under the canopy of the monarchy, in the ivory tower of David's court, there sprang up a "court theology" which played so much havoc on Israel's religion. The priestly tradition of the OT is witness to us as to how priests, away from the pulsating or languishing and bleeding life of the masses, could fabricate huge, hedeous and baneful theological, liturgical and legal colossi and corpora to the ruin of true religion and to the dehumanisation of the people under the pretext and facade of cult!

Mainstream theology has often been this sham theology of the elites, the aristocracy. The pontifical Roman Catholic theology taught in our seminaries, Sunday schools, five-star institutes of

theology, spirituality etc. is the Roman Catholic version or edition of this oppressive court theology! Those who cook up and spin out this mainstream theology and its god are mostly priests. They justify the status quo with myths (myths of creation, myths for the origin and justification of the caste system, diversity of language, and aetiologies of all kinds); they enshrine sanctuary deities away from the mortal life of the poor; they develop rites and rituals of their priestcraft, propagate their doctrines and systems through proselytisation with missionary zeal.

In helpless opposition to this mainstream of court theology there stands the real God of the poor. The theologians of this God and his theology are the poor. What is theology for this God and His poor? It is a theology in which 1) God's will is happiness of the poor (*Gloria Dei vivens homo*: God's glory is man fully alive); 2) Life of faith is struggle for the life of the poor; 3) worship is service to the poor; 4) Prayer is anguished reflection on the mortal life of the poor; 5) Sp. exercises would comprise demonstrations, dharnas, road-blocking, effigy-burning, gheraoing the oppressors and all other forms of struggles, fights, strategies etc. for achieving the goals of the poor; 6) Priests would be courageous leaders engaged in life-risking ventures on behalf of the poor; 7) parish churches would be centres for energization of the poor.

Now, death of the bourgeois mainstream theology is essential for the emergence and practice of authentic theology, which is the theology of the poor. We, theologians and exegetes, need conversion, which should be nothing short of total break with the doctrines, dogmas, rituals and other practices with which we knowingly and/or unknowingly oppress the poor, and hinder their liberation. In other words the dire need of the hour for us is to practise the 'atheism' of Jesus! Anything short of this would make us compromisers and opportunists. Priests have always been adept at compromising and white-washing. Have we not used the Bible ideologically, for self-aggrandisement, subservience to the powers that be, lust for power, money, security etc.? Did not the followers of Christ go to the crusades with Bible and Crucifix? Did they not accompany the colonial powers for religions colonialism, robbing the Africans and Asiatics of their land

and freedom in exchange for baptism, holy pictures and prayer books? Samuel said that Exodus is the story of an enslaved people told by the enslaved people themselves. Is that fully true? The story and saga of the Exodus was told and retold for many years in many contexts and historical situations before it reached the Yahwist, the court theologian of David. First it was recited or sung by the enslaved and liberated people themselves, then it was sung by the tribes of the Amphictyony and then it was narrated and theologized by the Yahwist. And why did the Yahwist write down this saga and theology of the Exodus? Could it not be for showing God's finger in the rise of the Davidic dynasty which was brought to might and glory, not so much by the hand of God as by the political astuteness of the crafty David himself? Later on do we not see the priestly tradition manipulating the Exodus saga for giving justification to its institutions, festivals and customs? Samuel has rightly said that our faith and religion is founded, not on texts, but on events. True; but the faith-founding events of our religion got interpreted by various authors to suit their objectives. Thus we have many interpretations and theologizations in the Bible; and every theologization is an assault on truth, although done with the best of intentions.

Theology is always a disservice when done outside its only authentic and genuine matrix. This matrix, as Samuel tells us, is the life and struggle of the poor. As soon as we stay out of it and start theologizing, we become perpetrators of this disservice. Lotus grow from miry ponds and it is good for us to keep in mind that if only the plant remains rooted in the mire and mud, can it produce lotus. Armchair theologians can produce only palace theologies, not people's theology.

Today people's theology is emerging in many parts of the world. Many professional theologians are going headlong into its travails, not as midwives, but as students of midwifery. The struggles of the people are not occasions or opportunities for theologians to experiment and scrutinize them with the tools of their profession. Unless the poor themselves theologize no authentic theology will be born. There is no option for a theologian but to become poor and live and struggle with the poor if he is to be true to his call. Unless we be converted and become poor,



we cannot become theologians. You and I are not poor and hence if we theologize we will produce a theology convenient for our church, our religious order or for the hobby or venture we pursue.

One final remark: The opening chapters of the Bible tell us that human, come of age, went away from the garden of God and is now confronting and wrestling with the task of making or marring his world where God is not present. In that world he achieves his gains and commits his sins, and for both he is answerable and responsible. But he came into this world wearing aprons of skin, made for him by God, a souvenir from God who thereby assures him of his blessing and approval whenever he works for making this world a better home for all. If this is God's will, namely, the happiness of humankind, then every theology should be human-centred and not God-centred. Why should we be particular about perceiving, positing or postulating God, His word, His activity in the human stories mentioned in Samuel's paper? We have the inbuilt compulsion to posit human realities in the pigeon holes of our theological categories. Unless we free ourselves from the shackles of our theological profession and become fully human and poor like the carpenter from Nazareth, will we ever succeed in understanding and assimilating people's theology, let alone in doing it? Jesus of Nazareth came as a carpenter, son of Joseph and Mary. He was glorified and magnified later on as Lord, Son of God, Son of David, Bread, Light, Life, Truth. If Jesus is enough for us, we should not encrust him with titles coming from religions, theologies and systems he came to abrogate. The poor are not Jesus, but humans, brothers and sisters, of our own flesh, blood and bones, and religion should mean loving and serving them as Jesus did on the basis of our common humanhood (cf. Is 58:7; Job 31:15; Math. 25:37-39). Religion and spirituality for Christians should not mean godly life, but god-like life which in concrete would mean to be Yahweh-like, to be Jesus-like in our style of life. 'Outrageous', I would say, partiality towards the poor will make us Yahweh-like. Oneness, identification or fellowship with the poor will make us Jesus-like. And we should never forget that Jesus was poor and that He never acquired wealth and security by taking the vow of poverty in a powerful religious order. Unless we be converted and become

poor, we cannot be Jesus-like and we will never be theologians ! And if we dabble into people's theology unconverted, we shall only be stifling it. The struggles of the poor got dampened when official religion poked its nose into them offering paternalism, blessings, benedictions and advice galore. The existing religions of today are all institutionalized and are tailored to the needs and interests of the well-to-do. As such they can only kill the genuineness, authenticity, vitality and vigour of people's theology. Liberation of theology and conversion of theologians are essential pre-requisites for any participation in any contribution to people's theology.

## 2. Gabriele Dietrich's Response to Corona Mary's Paper

Sister Corona's article points to a very just problem — the place of women in the Church. Why are they not ordained to priesthood? Why are they excluded from the decision-making processes? Why is their role in the theological formation systematically curtailed? She points out these problems particularly.

During the workshop some of the participants expressed their hesitations as to how these are related to people's theology, because the ordination of women is not a need of the people. Does it mean that nuns will always aim at selfish interests? Any thought in this direction will have to face the question about the relation of male hierarchy to people in general. As long as the structure of the church is upheld, denial of equality to women must be questioned. At the same time, the claim of women to equality is so explosive as to destroy all hierarchical discriminations in society. As I feel the purport of Corona's article is this: either priesthood be allowed to women or priesthood itself be considered obsolete. Such a stance should anyhow be taken seriously. It is almost heart-rending to read from the article what all theological tangles a woman has to undo before she can put forward so simple a demand as right to equality.

It is startling to hear how much the masculinity of Christ is upheld as an inseparable part of his redemptive mission and how women are tactically excluded from participation in the Incarnation, made possible through Mary's voluntary conception and bearing of Jesus. I suppose the anguish many a sister has with regard to the teachings of the Church and the attitude of the hierarchy towards women is clearly implied in the learned deliberations in the paper. Nuns and priests, while adjusting themselves to such mental strains, will have to take steps to put an end to the marginalization of women in the Church. It is beyond doubt that such a step would enhance the role of the laity in the Church; women will take up diverse responsibilities in the Church and get strengthened in their freedom.

2. My view point is absolutely that of the laity. This status of life is not something forced upon me, but entirely chosen by myself. I belong to a church which gives ordination to women. I personally chose not to become a priest because I did not like to be part of any form of church hierarchy. I wish to make it clear that this choice should in no way intervene in the decision of any other woman to be a priest. Still I would like to raise a few questions: What are we really doing to ourselves as women when we strive to achieve equality in a feudal, male chauvinistic set up? There are many ways of women getting entangled in the structures of the Church, which help eventually tighten its hold on the body as well as the mind of women. It can be seen happening in organisations fostering fundamentalism and communalism. As has been pointed out by Asghar Ali Engineer, there were women in the forefront of movements for social justice in Iran during the revolutionary period of Khomeini. They upheld the Islamic ideals of social justice against western ideas of liberation which only made women mere sex objects. But, as a result of this agitation, the reins of male domination which controlled women got strengthened. In the secular field women are made members there in many development projects which contain many things contrary to the interests of women. Even in liberation struggles women get identified with the male roles of armed struggles and rebellion. A recent example is the role of women in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. The perspective of women regarding social transformation must transcend the conventional concepts of equality. New structures that give central importance to the production and conservation of life are to be created combining ecological elements, and such structures as would assist life against market economy. For the survival of humankind, we have to look beyond the nominal equality of contemporary institutions where man is the measure of everything.

3. People's theology is indeed a complex concept. I agree with Rayan's approach to look for theological implications embedded in the accounts of people's liberative endeavours. Common people usually do not engage in theological discussions — still they have faith. I think people's theology is a wider concept than liberation theology because not only the phases of struggle but the entire gamut of life with its activities fall within the horizon of people's theology. It comes very close to a perspective



of the feminist movement: to its declaration for life and its beauty. As a result of the division of labour on the basis of sex, women have been involved in all life-fostering endeavours as a routine. Today, this legacy is to be held aloft as the common human responsibility of both man and woman against the life-destroying powers of the market and of the militarization of day to day life. This faith that asserts the preciousness of life need not necessarily be religious. It can be secular as well. At the same time, it can be found in the depths of all religious faiths. It is this faith in life and people that leads all liberation movements onward. It necessarily has two dimensions: assertion of life and human dignity on the one hand and repentance on the other. The ability to review, to rectify, to pardon and to begin life anew is an essential dimension of this faith.

4. People's theology necessarily has a multi-religious perspective. People belonging to different religions and caste and cultural backgrounds live in the same area. In handling the fundamental problems of survival, they try to share the ultimate interests of their own lives through religious means. When the International Women Workers' Day was celebrated this year many feminist organizations raised the problem of communalism and declared solidarity of women against the dividing walls of religion and caste. The organization of the slum dwellers in Madurai chose the subject, 'We will resist communal riots and declare the solidarity of women', for their March 8 celebrations. This organization fights for basic amenities of life and shelter; for avoidance of use of force in the family and in social and political processes, and for space both physical and cultural. In the form of satirical farces and songs dealing with caste riots, the mutual help of Hindu-Muslim women, and the threat from goons having political patronage the women in the slums presented their problems. These were acted in front of the police commissioner who had earlier put many of our cases pending. This direct involvement of women made the police arrest the local goons, though earlier endeavours had proved fruitless. This reminded me of the prophecy of prophet Micah in the Old Testament:

"They will hammer their swords into ploughshares,  
their spears into sickles.....

Each man will sit under his vine and his fig tree,  
with no one to trouble him" (Mic 4:3-4).

The vision of the entire humankind coming to zion in the name of God is also Micah's (Mic 4:1-2).

Religious symbols acquire significance in unexpected situations. Once we summoned a panchayat at the Andal temple in Sriviliputhoor. It was in the context of a woman's determination to divorce her husband who used to beat her cruelly. She was bargaining with him and his family for getting her dowry back and for some basic material aid to start a new life. It was then that Andal who had broken all her family ties and stood firm in her love for Lord Krishna, became an inspiration for all who came forward to support the woman. The husband's party also felt that they could not cheat before Andal. In this situation, even though the woman got only a nominal material help, she succeeded in starting a new and dignified life. There are many a Muslim woman who oppose religious laws which allow divorce at any time, and at the same time believe that God is just and would keep their dignity safe. They uphold their faith against religious fundamentalists and the so called religious pundits.

5. My mind was immersed in prophet Micah, while I was travelling to attend this seminar: "To act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). In the original Hebrew the text reads a bit different: with your God walk vigilantly. It is closely related to lending our ears to and reading the signs of the times. We are going through troubled time. Violence has crept into and shattered all our political processes. In the North Eastern parts of the country and in states like Jammu and Kashmir life has long since been militarised. Such things have started playing havoc with our life in the South also. It causes terrific mental anguish in the people. Besides, the rising economic crisis and inflation has made the day to day survival of the people extremely difficult. To love, to be vigilant, to plan out strategies, even to think of justice is difficult. Law of the jungle and survival of the fittest appear to be more and more the order of the day. Immediate intervention is the greatest need of the hour for the survival of the people and adequate protection of the basic requirements of life. In this context the struggles of fishermen, slum dwellers, farmers, tribals, Dalits and women become very crucial.

Let me conclude this article with the optimistic view that feminist movement might be able to alter this situation. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi was symptomatic of the long and

frightening road to militarization and the diminution of democratic processes. Some say that Tamilnadu is fast becoming another Punjab. Could we at this juncture think of peace and non-violence? It may not be possible at present to think of non-violence such as Gandhiji's satyagraha against colonialism. Violence has become so widespread in our life situation. Because it is impossible to resist the use of force against women in most cases, feminist movements have already started taking steps for non-violent resistance. It is crucial that we protect those things that are necessary for day to day survival. In some situations it is the safeguarding of human right for land and water against the laws of market economy. It is indeed a long process marked with failure and despair. From this dead end there are no short cuts.

In such circumstances Jeremiah 31:15-22 provides me with inspiration. It is about life in an alien land where there was no hope for an easy salvation. In another of my articles, I dealt with this part in detail. ("The Creation of Feminist Theology in South Asia" in *Christu Jyothi Journal*, June 1990). The text exhibits feminist symbols which are equally strong and similar to that of a revolutionary youth who tries to get liberated through the use of force. God, who loves that young man and his quest for liberation gives optimistic promise, not to him but to his lamenting mother and frail sister. The final declaration of this text is in verse 22 — "Yahweh is creating something new on earth; the woman protects man".

The meaning given to it by the traditional male chauvinists is this — women provide support to men in crises. It is nothing new, but only a stale interpretation. The real meaning is its antithesis. It is the departure of women from their traditional role of supporters (sometimes saviours) of the conventional male chauvinistic structures. Woman on her own takes up the responsibility for protecting the life of humankind and nature, as a right. It even protects men from men themselves. Though there is survival, it is not the survival of the fittest. Support structures in which people can get involved without fear or threat — permanent freedom of expression, cultural identity, mutual interaction with nature — are meant here. Such a vision is there in the heart of the feminist people's theology. We will have sufficient courage for the dawn of this new creation, if we are willing to move with our God vigilantly, in justice and mercy.

# **People's Theology**

## **Final Statement of the National Seminar on People's Theology, Theology Centre, Kottayam**

In the midst of communal tensions, struggle for self determination, Dalit and Tribal fight for justice, women's movements, violence and terrorism in our country we, a group of people involved in movements for the promotion of justice, peace and solidarity came together on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the international theological journal *Jeevadhara* at the Theology Centre, Kottayam from 8th—11th June 1991 in order to reflect on our commitment as theologians and social activists. For the past two decades this journal has been engaged in the promotion of a theology that emerges from the life situation of the people. Today we feel more than ever the need to sharpen our insights and widen our vision so that the movement begun with the launching of *Jeevadhara* may gain momentum and contribute towards the articulation of a theology that is capable of supporting the struggles and aspirations of the people for life, dignity and freedom. It is in this context that the choice of the theme of the seminar 'People's Theology' becomes significant.

### **I. People's Theology**

The day to day life-experiences of the people expressed in their aspirations, struggles, symbols and belief-systems manifest a theology that is implicit in every endeavour of individuals and communities. By 'People' we mean primarily the powerless, the oppressed, the marginalised, the exploited as well as those who struggle to win back and maintain their dignity. This theology rests on the basic values of justice, freedom and equality among human beings. Some characteristics of this theology are as follows:



- a) It expresses a strong commitment to life here on earth.
- b) It aims at fellowship among people and communion between people and nature and the Divine.
- c) It is marked by political involvement as well as dissent and protest against all anti-people forces.
- d) It reckons with and integrates into itself the world-views and cultural heritage of those groups that are usually ignored by dominant ideologies and development processes. This also means that People's Theology will be pluralistic. There will be, for instance, a Dalit theology, a Tribal theology, Feminist theology and Ecological theology.
- e) It discovers the divine in the call to commitment; in the ability to transcend narrow self-interests and constraints imposed by oppressive situations; and in the vision of wholeness which affirms respect for all forms of life and the need for forgiveness, reconciliation, solidarity and sharing.
- f) It adopts a multi-religious perspective in which the moving force of action will be a spirituality of fellowship, commitment in love, and dedication to integral development. This will enable people to maintain their religious identity and yet journey together in solidarity towards the same goal. This theology will also include in its articulation non-religious ideologies committed to the promotion of full humanity and integrity of creation.
- g) It makes its own the perspective of the poor.
- h) People's Theology and Liberation Theology coincide in large measure as regards concern, goals, commitment, perspective of the poor and critical analysis. The only difference perhaps consists in this that while liberation theology develops within struggles against oppression, people's theology describes a wider horizon and includes, for instance, creation and appreciation of the beautiful in nature or art or relationship. People's theology will be operative even when every kind of oppression has hopefully been overcome.

## II. A methodology for People's Theology

The starting point of this theology is the life of the people especially of the marginalized groups with their struggles and quest for justice and dignity. A necessary condition for developing

a valid theology of the people is a deep commitment to the people through a life of involvement. The act of theologising will consist in listening to each other, facilitating critical reflection and articulation and thus becoming capable of working towards integral liberation. In this process people will learn to re-read their religious scriptures, their inherited traditions, myths and symbol systems. A critique of existing ideologies and theological methodologies which are based on discrimination against women, caste hierarchies, ethnic domination and dogmatic absolutism becomes an essential requirement for the birthing of People's Theology.

Our traditional theological approach which begins with scripture and tradition and speculative, abstract, doctrinal formulations has as its main preoccupation other worldly concern and safeguarding of orthodoxy. It cannot provide us with an adequate tool for people-centred theologizing. In this context the role of the professional theologians has to be reviewed. They are challenged to overcome their isolation and participate in the life and struggles of the people, so that they can play a supportive role for the emergence of People's Theology.

### III. Implications for praxis

All organized religious traditions are challenged to respond to People's Theology. To do so they have to overcome the barriers of sectarian parochialism so that they can enter into the struggles of the larger human communities. This calls for radical changes in the structures of organized religions and in the orientation imparted to the various sectors and groups in them.

One of the important structural changes will be the dismantling of hierarchism as it exists, for instance, among Christians, Bohra Muslim Community and some others. Hierarchism inherited from imperial and feudal times and traditions ill-accords with spirituality of fellowship implicit in all the faiths. The people who suffer and struggle together should be participants in the making of decisions and shaping of their common destiny. Co-responsibility should mark the life and endeavours of the whole community. Therefore, theologies, interpretations and leadership must emerge from the life-experience of the people. They should not

be imposed from above or outside. In particular, the various kinds of restrictions and discriminatory rules and practices maintained against women within the religious and social traditions must be rejected and eliminated. No office or functions, administrative or cultic should be denied to women or to any sector of the community. Women's unrestricted participation in the life of the religious group should lead to a de-structuring of feudal, patriarchal models of thought and social practice.

## Conclusion

People's Theology poses an all-round challenge to all of us. It takes us beyond our confessional and ideological limitations and makes us become people with the people. Those of us who came from academic engagements as well as those who came from involvement with people's struggles have both benefited from the sharing of experiences. We now see our task in a new light and a new perspective. We make a renewed commitment to the people in the midst of whom, we believe, the Divine is active. We look forward to a future with hope that there will emerge on our earth a new humanity. We resolve to make the best contribution we can to the ushering in of the New Age.

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## **Book Reviews**

*Christian Mission in a Pluralistic World* By John Patrick Brennan, 134 pp, Rs. 35.00, published by St Paul Publications, P.O. Box 9814, Bombay 400 050.

The Second Vatican Council's affirmation that the Church is, of her very nature, missionary, has been re-echoed by Pope John Paul II in his 1990 Encyclical "Redemptoris Missio" where he states, "No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples".

Now the question is, how is the Church to be missionary in a pluralistically religious world? How do we proclaim the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, his Lordship, in the face of similar claims from the followers of other religions? How do we harmonise the fact of the universal call to salvation alongside the 'scandalous' particularity of Jesus Christ? Are we to be insensitive, triumphalistic or downright domineering and dismissive of the claims of others? How are we to account for the salvation of the four-fifths of humanity who do not know of Christ or, at least, do not accept him as their Saviour? How are we to believe in a good, caring and all-powerful God and Father when the greater proportion of our brothers and sisters do not know of this love and care?

These questions are not new and are, in fact, as old as Christianity itself. What is new is the urgency with which they seek answers. The urgency is all the more felt in India because of its pluralistic religious nature, and already some of the Indian theologians and missiologists, such as Raymond Panikkar, D. Amalorpavadas, M. Amaladoss, J. Kavumkal, G. Vanchipurackal and others have ventured to face these questions in the Indian context.

In this book under review Fr Brennan poses these questions from a global and theological point of view. Sharing the insights of Vatican II, the Fathers of the Church, and the well-known contemporary theologians — including those from India such as



B. Griffiths, J. Neuner, R. Panikkar, M. M. Thomas, D. Acharuparambil, J. R. Chandran, M. Dhavamony, J. Dupuis, I. Puthiadam, P. Fallon, J. Kavumkal, Chrys Saldanha, and other world-figures such as Rahner, Congar, Balthasar, de Lubac, Danielou, Schillebeeckx, Küng, Knitter, Barth, Buhlmann, Dulles, Pannenberg, Haring, Tillich, Kasper, Schnackenburg, Sobrino — he presents the different responses that have been given in modern times to the problem of the relationship of Christianity to other religions.

The responses Fr Brennan examines here, succinctly yet clearly, are based on the three different approaches, namely, the Exclusivistic (salvation is only through the Church), the Inclusivistic (salvation is to be found in all religions but ultimately from and through Christ who is present in them in some mysterious way), and the Pluralistic (all religions are equally valid for salvation). The net result of these confused thinking coupled with the misunderstanding of the spirit of "dialogue" envisaged by the Vatican II has been an apathy in the vital field of evangelisation on the part of many a Church representative especially in a mission territory like India. Many Dioceses in India do not seem to have even a commission for evangelisation!

The problem arising out of these "approaches" is one that affects the Church in every fibre of her being and activity. It poses profound questions for her understanding of Christ, of the Incarnation, of her own nature, what she means by faith, revelation and salvation and how she defines these in relation to the faith, revelation and salvation claimed by other religions. In this book Fr Brennan re-examines these questions and tries to provide answers. "I do so", he says, "from within the Christian faith, as a believer in Jesus Christ and as a missionary of Jesus Christ, one sent to witness to him." Regarding the book he states: "I write, not for the professional theologians but for my fellow missionaries, who are battling with the questions raised in their day-to-day existence, trying to be faithful to the Message they were sent to proclaim and at the same time trying to be totally respectful of the people to whom they proclaim it".

It is a book for every Bishop, missionary, religious, seminarian and educated lay-person.

Carmel M. Kizh

*The Prayer Called Life* by George Kaitholil, St. Paul Publications, Bandra, Bombay 400 050, Pages 119. Price Rs. 15.

Fr. George Kaitholil, has presented the Christian world with another precious book. There are many collections of prayers and there are many other books that discuss prayer. But this book is a class in itself. It speaks of prayer in terms intelligible and relevant to the life of people of all walks and states of life.

According to the author, prayer is not merely recitation of prayers or the chanting of mantras; prayer, above all, is a life of faith lived in the right relationship with God and neighbour. Prayer transforms life and life gives tone and tune to prayer; thus there will be no dichotomy between prayer and life. The whole life, thought, activity and experience of the believer becomes prayer. This is a refreshing insight that enlightens and inspires. Some of the chapter-headings themselves speak volumes. For example: The Lord Is Right Here, Meeting God in Everyday Life; Every Experience Becomes Prayer; Becoming Prayer Ourselves; Praying with the Whole Being; Loving Service and Prayer; Moving with God's Project for Us; Let the Word Become Flesh in Us; Communion through Silence etc.

However, this is not any invention of the author. With the help of examples and quotations he shows clearly how this way of understanding prayer is based on the Word of God and how this was taught and practised by the saints. His thoughts are profound, his language simple, and his style racy. In fact, one would be happy to read more pages of this kind.

This, therefore, is an excellent book that can be pleasurable read, easily understood and profitably meditated upon and lived by. It is a book for every adult Christian, for every parent, student, nun, priest, seminarian, preacher, teacher and worker.

Joseph Thenasseril



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